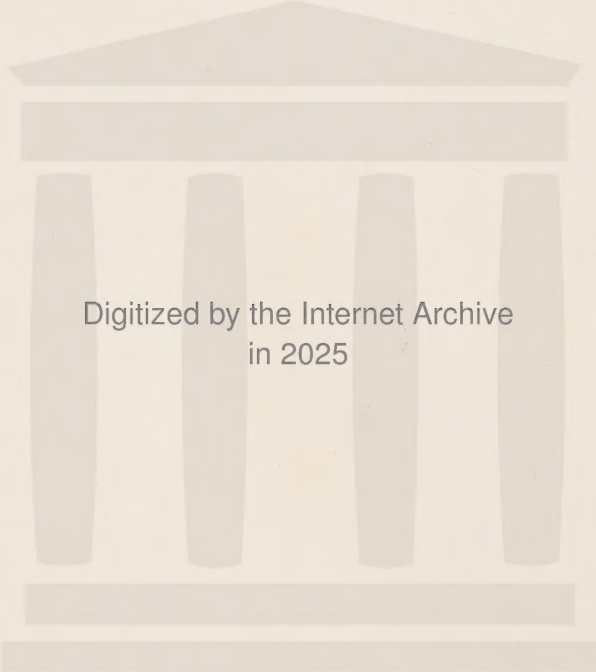


CHARLIE IS MY DARLING

ANNE BEALE





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VOL. I.

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LONDON: HURST & BLACKETT, LIMITED.

CHARLIE IS MY DARLING

BY

ANNE BEALE

AUTHOR OF

'FAY ARLINGTON,' 'THE PENNANT FAMILY,' 'COURTLEROY,'
'SQUIRE LISLE'S BEQUEST,' ETC., ETC.

Bear through sorrow, wrong and ruth,
In thy heart the dew of youth,
On thy lips the smile of truth.

LONGFELLOW.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
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CHARLIE IS MY DARLING.

CHAPTER I.

BELLE.

‘NEXT-OF-KIN wanted in America. Jabez Dauncey died intestate at Montreal, leaving a large fortune. Apply, Messrs. Stint and Co., solicitors, Montreal. A hundred thousand pounds!’

This announcement struck the eye and riveted the attention of Mr. Dauncey, of Castle Farm, Hollyfield, as he sat, pipe in mouth, with the *Daily Telegraph* outspread before him.

‘Jabez Dauncey! There can’t be two

of that name in the world, unless he has a son, and then there would be no advertisement,' he muttered. 'It is my cousin Jabez, as sure as a gun—and surer, for guns miss fire—and I am his heir. Here's a turn of luck at last. Belle! Belle! come here quick! Where is the girl? She's never to be found when wanted. Molly, where's Belle?'

Mr. Dauncey flung down his pipe, thereby endangering the *Daily Telegraph*, rushed to the parlour-door, uplifted stentorian sounds in the passage, and brought Molly, mop in hand, and cap much awry.

'What's the matter, master? One 'ould think the house was afire. Miss Belle need be having nine lives, like the cats, for 'tis Belle here, and Belle there, and Belle everywheres. She was tapping the cider by now for the men, and I'll warrant me she's gone to the hayfield.'

'Call her in!—send after her!—say I

want her directly!' shouted Mr. Dauncey, returning to the *Daily Telegraph*, which he was in the habit of calling the *D. T.*

'Rectly! 'Tis always 'rectly with master,' repeated Molly, clattering off in a pair of those nearly extinct and antediluvian constructions called pattens.

Molly was a Welshwoman, and clung to old ways with commendable if provoking pertinacity.

'Jabez Dauncey! There can't be two of that name in Great Britain, much less America,' resumed Mr. Dauncey. 'They wouldn't have advertised in the *D. T.* if they could find anyone belonging to him over the water. Belle! here you are at last. I thought you were never coming.'

'Yes, father, here I am. Molly tumbled down in her hurry to find me, and broke the string of her patten,' said Belle, who was much out of breath.

'Sit down, girl. Here's a piece of luck

at last. I knew it would come sooner or later,' cried Mr. Dauncey, vacating his seat right in front of his beloved paper. 'There! read that!' he continued, pointing to the paragraph which had so excited him.

Belle read, but did not quite understand.

'What does it mean, father? "Next-of-kin—Jabez Dauncey." Has it anything to do with us?'

'I should think it had. Why, it's my cousin Jabez—my first cousin—my father's brother's very own son, who ran away from home—or, rather, went away, for his parents were dead, and he had nobody to prevent him—and has never been heard of since. He was about my age; and, to tell the truth, I had forgotten all about him, till I saw that big "Wanted," and was convinced that I am the "next-of-kin."'

'Mr. Mulready says those advertisements are often hoaxes, father.'

'What does he know about it? He

hasn't the spirit of a bumble-bee. He's content to drone away amongst his flowers, and, for my part, I can't see that he gets any honey out of them.'

'He carries off all the prizes, father, and is the most polite and particular of all the station-masters in the county; everybody says so,' replied Belle, an angry flush on her face.

'Then it must be true, Belle. But this is a *bonâ fide* advertisement for a next of kin, and I am sure as sure can be that I am lawful heir to a large fortune. If Jabez Dauncey has died without issue, I can prove that he had neither brother nor sister, and that I am his nearest relative on his father's side; and prove it I will.'

'How, father? You can't possibly go to America, and, as we know to our cost, one sends one fortune after another in law, and affidavits, and all those worries, and loses both fortunes in the end. I wish

with all my heart there was neither law nor newspapers. They only muddle what brains one has.'

Mr. Dauncey laughed, and thrust his hands through his crisp grey hair. Although he was nearly sixty, he was neither white-headed nor bald, and his whiskers and eyebrows were still untouched by the frost of years. He was a tall, wiry man, and his figure seemed as restless as his face. He could keep neither still; for, while his grey eyes wandered in all directions, his limbs seemed troubled by St. Vitus's dance. As Belle knew to her cost, his mind was as restless as his body.

She was apparently very composed; that is to say, she had a strong will, and put force upon herself to keep a quiet exterior when she was often sorely rebellious within. This much was visible while she sat by her father with the newspaper outspread before them. The country folk called her

‘a well-growed young woman,’ and that was not a bad description of her. She was of good height, shapely, and carried herself well. She was fair, with honest, intelligent eyes, a kindly smile, and a fine complexion. This also was apparent as she watched her father ‘rub up his locks,’ as she was wont to describe his habit of ‘combing his hair with his fingers,’ as she also phrased it.

‘I don’t see why I shouldn’t go to America, Belle,’ he said, in a sort of deprecating way ; for he knew his daughter too intimately to suppose she would approve of such a proceeding. ‘You see, we want money. There’s that fellow Morse complaining of his drains and his roof, and I vow I don’t know where to turn for a pound to put his farm straight. It would take more than the rent to repair it.’

‘Our rent is ready : that’s one comfort,’ said Belle. ‘But if you can’t repair

Morse's house, father, how can you manage to go to America?'

'Oh, ah! Pearce would advance me a trifle for that.'

Belle started as if she suddenly felt the prick of a big pin.

'You promised me you would never borrow again, father. We can't pay the interest of what you owe that skinflint Pearce as it is, and I am always expecting that he will be down upon us,' she said.

'This fortune will pay him off, and get rid of all our liabilities, Belle. I'll ask Miss Dulcey to lend me a trifle. She's very kind, and sees things with a broader view than you do.'

'Oh, father! I wouldn't be beholden to any of that family. She is goodness itself; but, if the Weatherleys knew you were borrowing money, there would be less chance than ever for Charlie's children. The squire is more bitter than ever

since poor Amy's death. And I don't wonder, since Charlie married her against the consent of the whole clan.'

Here Mr. Dauncey could sit still no longer, but rose and went to the window. Belle's eyes followed him, and she involuntarily shrugged her shoulders and made an impatient gesture with her hands, which were fine, work-a-day hands of which any woman might be proud.

'I wonder what he'll do next,' she muttered, or rather thought, as she glanced round the room to see that all was straight.

It was a large and comfortable dining-parlour, furnished with old-fashioned, strong mahogany chairs and tables, a sofa, a bookcase or two, and a side-board, all of which had been in the Dauncey family for some generations. The room looked gloomy, more from its external than internal aspect. Opposite the win-

dow through which Mr. Dauncey was looking were the ruins of an old castle, surrounded by what had once been a fosse or moat, and seated on an elevation amongst trees and brushwood. This served to darken the room, though there was a cheerful gravelled path round the base of the hill, which led to the vicarage, and tended to enliven the dwellers at the farm. Molly was wont to say that she should go 'by the head,' but for that bright bit of yellow gravel. Certainly the outlook was not cheerful. The duck-pond was none of the clearest, and the farm buildings were not specially trim ; but, as Belle was wont to say, ' Flo's parlour looks into the garden, and one could not desire anything more pleasant.'

' Here comes Moss, the station-porter. What can he want?' suddenly exclaimed Mr. Dauncey

Belle was on her feet in a moment, and

looking out of the window. Round the gravel path, beneath the gloomy ruin, came a railway official with a letter in his hand.

She hurried to the front door, and reached it just as the two ponderous raps announcing a telegram resounded on the stentorian knocker.

‘I’m glad I didn’t disappoint him,’ thought Belle, smiling. ‘He hasn’t much practice, and Mr. Mulready says he’s got an old knocker to work upon at the station, which serves to frighten the crows from Farmer Spence’s wheat-field. I’ll let him knock again.’

She paused behind the door with her hand on the latch, till down came another summons, the second an improvement on the first, inasmuch as in addition to the double rap there was the echo affected by the modern telegraph-boys.

‘Mr. Mulready told me to hurry, miss,

as telegrams is important,' said the youth, when Belle opened the door.

'Thank you, Moss. Go into the kitchen, and ask Molly to give you some bread and cheese. You've had a long walk.'

'Any answer, miss?' asked Moss, importantly.

Mr. Dauncey stood behind Belle, and snatched the telegram from her hand. He hurried back to the dining-room with it.

'No answer, tell him, no answer,' he shouted.

When she had ordered the bread and cheese for Moss and bade him thank Mr. Mulready for sending the telegram, forgetting that so magnanimous an act was part of his duty, she returned to her father.

'It is from Charlie. Look here, Miss Belle. He thinks more of our American cousin than you do.'

Belle took the telegram and read,

‘See advertisement, D. T., Jabez Dauncey. Shall be with you to-night.’

‘Exactly twelve words, counting the letters as words,’ exclaimed Belle, checking off the telegram on her fingers. ‘Charlie has kept within the sixpence for once.’

‘Thou’rt a thrifty lass, Belle,’ laughed her father. ‘A fortune would be lost upon you.’

‘Yes ; my one pleasure in life is to make something out of nothing. But Charlie is not thrifty, or he would not leave the children and his profession and rush off here because of a chance advertisement. But oh, I shall be glad to see him. I must go and prepare.’

‘He sees the matter as I do, Belle. With three children and not much of a practice, he can’t afford to lose the chance of a million or so ; and those American fortunes are never under that sum.’

‘I would rather have a few hundreds in hand than thousands in America,’ replied practical Belle, who possessed that inestimable gift—a sound mind in a sound body. ‘You had better look after the hay, father, or we shall be worse off than we are. Let’s save the hay first, and then go off on our travels.’

‘What should I do without my governess?’ said Mr. Dauncey, thrusting the newspaper into an old-fashioned bureau, and hurrying off.

‘Miss Dulcey says I could get a small fortune for that bureau,’ mused Belle. ‘But I couldn’t have the heart to sell it. What generations of Daunceys have sat at it, puzzling their brains over accounts like father, and writing all sorts of letters—business letters, family letters, love letters. Poor old thing, I won’t part with you; though Miss Dulcey says you are quite the fashion in great houses, and that it is

amusing to see people opening and shutting you, and pulling out your drawers, and examining your secret springs, and saying, "Oh, how lovely!" She is very funny when she takes off the smart people.'

It must not be supposed that Belle was idle while she mused. Her brains and fingers always worked together. She was dusting and rubbing up the furniture, sweeping the hearth, and brushing up the crumbs. The latter she threw out of the window, and they were soon pecked up by observant fowls. Nothing was wasted in Belle's small dominions. She might have been one of the lady-presidents of the National Thrift Society, as her father sometimes said. He would not have done for chairman, if example is needed in those who form committees.

'Charlie is coming to-night, Molly,' she said, when she had finished the sitting-room and went into the kitchen.

‘There’s glad you are ! There’s a colour you’ve got,’ responded Molly. ‘What will we be getting for supper ? He do always say there’s nothing better than eggs and bacon, and there’s plenty o’ they.’

‘And half a peck of peas. I’ll go and gather them at once ; he never can have enough peas. Dear Charlie !’

Belle went out by the back door into a large garden, surrounded by a thick hedge of laurel, privet, and hawthorn. This was the kitchen garden, and well stocked, thanks to Belle, with fruit-trees and vegetables. It was only partially overshadowed by the old castle, and was a cheerful spot, open to the sky above, and surrounded by orchards and meadows. She was soon engaged in picking the finest pods of what she called her ‘choice marrowfats,’ which were very big peas indeed.

‘Poor fellow ! he always said he could never get enough peas,’ she muttered. ‘He

shall have a meal to-day. If only Flo were here, how happy we should be, in spite of this American bubble.'

While she was finishing her work, a dog pushed his way through the hedge and jumped upon her. It was a brown-eyed, soft-coated spaniel called Rover, and she stroked and petted him to his heart's content. He was a much spoilt animal, and expected it. Then she shouted to Molly to bring her a basin, and finally anchored in an arbour at the bottom of the garden, where she shelled her peas. Rover sat on the arbour-seat at her side, gravely watching her. Facing them were the hayfields and haymakers; on the right, at the top of the garden, was the house; on the left, a large orchard. The house was grey with years, and looked picturesque with its dark red roof and chimneys; albeit, the back alone was visible from the garden. Belle loved it, and declared she never wished to

leave it, though her father often grumbled at its gloom.

Although she was not born in it, she had lived the best part of her life within its walls. She had seen her dear mother die here, and had followed her to her grave in the church-yard beyond the castle hill. Here she had worked with and for her father, and helped him through many difficulties. Here she had striven to do her best for her brother and sister, the latter some years younger than herself; and here she had aided her poorer neighbours. True, she had not much to give, but what she had she gave freely. She had abundance of loving-kindness and sympathy, and when money failed they were always forthcoming. Every inmate of Hollyfield was her friend, and she always said she would rather end her days there than roam the world in search of other scenes, as so many of her contem-

poraries were doing ; at least, so said the village oracle, Miss Dulcey, who had a great contempt for the generation of what has been aptly called ‘globe-trotters.’ Her brother Charlie and her sister Flo could not be brought to love Hollyfield as well as she did ; indeed, the one was settled in London, the other was, at the moment, on the Continent, as travelling companion to Mrs. Prendergast. Charlie, she knew, was, like her father, hampered by lack of money, while Flo was ambitious, and disliked being tied down to village life. Moreover, she harped much on the fact that her father was born a gentleman, and should maintain his position ; forgetting that, in these overcrowded days, gentlemen, young and old, resort to farming, both at home and abroad, as a means to a livelihood. But Flo was not like Belle, and, when they discussed the question, always declared her intention of marrying as soon as possi-

ble, that she might not only escape from dulness herself, but help her family.

‘The fact is, Belle,’ she had said, ‘if only the house were still called Hollyfield Manor, as it used to be, and not Castle Farm, I should not mind so much; but I don’t like the word farm—it sounds common. When I am asked for our address I always give it as “Hollyfield, Orchardson,” and then nobody is the wiser.’

Belle and Flo had often laughed over this conceit, and Belle had ridiculed it finely; nevertheless, Belle was ever the home bird, and Flo the migratory.

At this moment, while Belle was shelling her peas, she broke out into song. She had a clear, pleasant voice, and was wont to sing by ear many of the old Jacobite ditties. Her special favourite was ‘Charlie is my Darling,’ because it spoke her feelings towards her brother; and her father and sister failed not to amuse themselves at

her expense. Rover, also, knew the air well, and pricked his ears when these words and their refrain echoed across the garden and meadows.

‘ ’Twas on a Monday morning,
Right early in the year,
When Charlie cam’ to our town,
The young Chevalier.

‘ As he cam’ marching up the street,
The pipes played loud and clear,
And all the folk cam’ running out,
To meet the Chevalier.

‘ Wi’ Highland bonnets on their heads,
Wi’ bright claymores and clear,
They cam’ to fight for Scotland’s right,
And the young Chevalier.

‘ They’ve left their bonnie Highland hills,
Their wives and bairnies dear,
To draw the sword for Scotland’s lord,
The young Chevalier.

‘ Oh ! there was mony a beating heart,
And mony a hope and fear,
And mony were the prayers put up
For the young Chevalier.

‘ Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling,
Charlie is my darling, the young Chevalier.’

CHAPTER II.

CHARLIE.

As afternoon drew on, restless Mr. Dauncey was roving from pillar to post, indoors and out; Molly was clearing the fire for the hundredth time, preparatory to frying the eggs and bacon; and Belle was watching, watching, from a certain observatory she had improvised on the gravel-walk beneath the ruin. Hence she looked down the road that led to Orchardston station, and marked any chance wayfarer coming therefrom. She was herself hidden by the undergrowth of bushes that made the ruin

almost impregnable to an unpractised explorer.

A large stone protruded from this vantage corner, also concealed by ferns and fox-gloves, which could be used as a seat when required; and her friend Mr. Mulready called the spot 'Belle's Bower,' much to her delight. But then Belle had bowers everywhere.

At the back of this particular one rose the hill on which what had once been a castle stood. There was neither tower nor battlement left, only a few broken walls, an old fosse, and endless big stones. But there were shadowy trees, intricate winding paths, impassable briars and brushwood, and endless superstitions. There were besides hardy primroses among the lichens, and even stray bluebells nodding to a chance sunbeam. Belle always wondered how they got there, for the nourishment they drew from the sun was but slight.

‘God’s gifts grow everywhere,’ she thought, and wondered no more. She was not a speculator.

The path of well-rolled gravel beneath her feet led to her home on the left, and to the church and vicarage on the right; it encircled the base of the hill, in short, and was the pride and pleasure of the sexton, who rejoiced to see it ‘shine out bright as daffodils’ beneath the gloomy hill. Below her elevated watch-tower she could see the roof of the school-house; and opposite, also seated high, a gabled cottage, or, more properly, villa. The church was hidden from sight by a projecting angle of the hill.

A more thoroughly country scene could not be imagined. The quiet would have been almost oppressive to the city denizen, for there were no manufactories for miles; the steam plough was still a myth, and the sound of the railway whistle penetrated

not to Hollyfield. But the birds were as restless as Mr. Dauncey, and the sound of their wings and songs kept the place alive. Moreover, there was a rookery in the very topmost trees of the castle hill, of which the villagers were commendably proud. Belle had reason to rejoice in her home and its surroundings, for Nature had favoured the scene with that sort of Sabbath peace which seems to pervade a stray hamlet here and there, even in this restless age.

‘There he is!’ exclaimed Belle, for the benefit of the rooks and blackbirds, and in a moment was scrambling down the slope and over a railing in country fashion.

She did not wait to make the round of the castle path and churchyard, but half slid down a wall, crossed a patch of grass, climbed a padlocked gate, and was in the high-road in no time. Flying down the hill, her hat at the back of her head, she

was soon face to face with him for whom she had been watching.

‘Belle!’ ‘Charlie!’ were the greetings, and a hearty embrace followed.

Brother and sister were devoted friends, almost, if not quite, lovers. Why ‘almost’? For they were lovers in the truest and purest sense.

‘You look ill, Charlie. What is the matter?’ said Belle, putting her arm within her brother’s.

‘Nothing. You got my telegram, Belle?’

‘Of course. What made you send it? Father has been on the move ever since, and talks of going to America as if it was next door, or, at least, not farther than the vicarage.’

‘I knew how it would be, Belle, so I thought it best to come off at once. Of course some one must see after this fortune.’

‘My dear Charlie, you are not going to

encourage father in his mad scheme !' cried Belle, amazed.

' I am going to talk it over with him, Belle. But let us leave the subject for the present. I am as "awearry" as the renowned Marianna, and have the children's faces before my eyes at this moment. They could not bear my leaving them. Since poor Amy went—well—went to heaven, they won't suffer me out of their sight, and I am sorely puzzled what to do with them. But we will talk of this too by-and-by. I am so glad to see you, dear Belle.'

Belle's response shone in her eyes and gleamed on her cheeks, as she nearly danced along by her brother's side. Oh ! how glad she was to see him ! The first turn in the road brought them to the entrance to the farm. A large five-barred gate, painted brown, spanned the unpretentious approach, and opened into the yard,

or half paddock, where the duck-pond lay. The road skirted this, and was separated by a wall only from the castle hill. This wall also divided the house from the paddock and pond aforesaid, and served to protect a small gravelled court, and a border from which grew the ivy and virginian creeper that covered the front of the house. Belle planted roses and clematis, but they did not thrive as she could wish, for want of sun. But then there was plenty of sunshine everywhere else, and one cannot command the omnipotent god of day. She remembered with pleasure that japonica and clematis and all sorts of parasites crept and trailed over the other sides of the house, though the front looked so grey and cold. Still an old farm, once a manor, built of grey stone, and well-tempered yellow-framed windows, and weather-worn brick roof, is always picturesque, and Castle Farm had been sketched and resketched by chance

artists, or would-be artists, visiting at the vicarage or at Miss Dulcey's. As to Belle's sister Flo, who fancied that she could draw, she had spoiled many a sheet of paper over it; *apropos* of whom Charlie put a question to Belle.

‘When did you hear from Flo?’

‘Nearly two months ago. She was at Bordighera. I'm sure I don't know how to pronounce it, but Mrs. Prendergast has stopped there for the spring months. I wish they would come home.’

Flo, as we have already stated, was acting as a sort of companion to a lady who had the nineteenth-century rage for travelling, and who had been roaming the Continent for a year or more.

‘Ah! here you are, Charlie, my boy,’ came from the stone porch, and out hastened Mr. Dauncey to meet his son. ‘I knew you would see this fortune in a sensible light. Isn't it glorious news?’

‘I hope so, father. But hasn’t it travelled too fast? Ill news comes quick, good news slow, as a rule,’ said Charlie grasping his father’s hand.

‘You are our good news to-day, and you and your telegram have come quick enough,’ put in Belle. ‘But supper is ready and waiting, and that is the best news for a hungry fortune-hunter.’

Molly had put on her best gown and cap—really a cap, with a full border and pink strings—and was anxiously awaiting Charlie in the passage, just between the kitchen and the front door.

‘Don’t run off, Molly,’ cried Charlie, catching sight of her vanishing skirts. ‘Supper will wait a moment.’

She returned, her face redder than her strings, and nearly shook off the hand Charlie offered her.

‘There’s glad I am to see you, Mr. Charles,’ she said. ‘I was thinking you was never coming home again.’

‘Now for the peas, Molly. There’s nearly a peck, Charlie, and you shall eat them all—if you can,’ laughed Belle, whose spirits were so good that she could laugh at a feather, as the saying is; indeed, she often had laughed to see the poultry peck at one another’s plumes.

‘Nothing will keep Belle in order,’ said Mr. Dauncey. ‘She doesn’t improve. But she’s a terrible weight on one’s prospects.’

‘Belle was always a compendium of common sense,’ replied Charlie; and Belle rejoiced to see him smile.

She went off into the kitchen to bring in the dishes Molly was preparing for her, and left father and son together.

‘It is a wonderful chance, Charlie,’ began Mr. Dauncey. ‘You know Jabez was brought up by my father, and was a troublesome chap enough. It must be confessed that father used to give us both a word and a blow now and then, but that was the fashion of our time. Bless me!

why, Solomon is nowhere nowadays, and the text is "Spoil the rod and spare the child," we've got so uncommon meek. I daresay you never thrashed your boy, if the truth must out.'

'Never, father. Amy wouldn't let me.'

'Poor Amy!' groaned Mr. Dauncey.

Belle came in with the biggest vegetable dish in the establishment, followed by Molly, bearing a huge platter of fried eggs and bacon. The table was already laid, so they were soon placed thereon. A piece of cold salt beef succeeded, and another vegetable dish full of the mealiest of potatoes, 'bursting their skins for joy at sight of Charlie,' said Belle.

'And I've made you some dumplins, Mr. Charles,' volunteered Molly, 'you'll be keeping a corner for they.'

'And die of indigestion, Molly. What's the use?' answered Charlie, which made Molly grin from ear to ear.

Small jokes go down where larger might stick in the throat.

Certainly, Charlie's appetite was no joke, and those wonderful marrowfats disappeared beneath it as rapidly as did the eggs and bacon. Mr. Dauncey and Belle also made a good supper; but their power of mastication was inferior to his. To Molly's great satisfaction, he reserved a corner for the huge, white, flaky dumplings, over which he spared neither cream nor sugar.

'When did you make a meal last, Charlie?' asked his father.

'I really don't know. A meal means to sit down and eat as I have just done. I have not had a meal since Amy left me.'

'And the children? Have they had no meals?' asked Belle.

'I hope so. Their old nurse sees to them. A medical man never can have regular meals. And now——'

Charlie paused, and looked from his father to his sister with a sort of perplexed air. He was not like Belle, self-reliant, though the most amiable and affectionate of men.

‘And now,’ echoed Mr. Dauncey, ‘what do you propose to do? You see this advertisement in the right light, if Belle does not, and we are in no circumstances to let the chance of a fortune slip.’

‘Let me clear the table first, and then we can talk it over,’ said Belle.

While she deftly and swiftly performed this household work, the two men took their pipes and sauntered down the garden to her arbour, where they discoursed, nothing loth to have a talk without her discriminating interposition. But she was not long in joining them, and then their intentions and hopes were declared. The brother and sister were side by side opposite the hayfields and the river, while the

father, who was always too restless to remain long seated, stood outside the bower, with Rover at his feet. The sun was about to complete his evening task of setting just opposite them, and his parting smiles kindled fields, garden, farmhouse, and, above all, Belle's pleasant face, into glowing softness; and the peace of nature seemed akin to the peace of God.

‘The fact is, Belle,’ began Mr. Dauncey, rather nervously, for he always dreaded his daughter's downright common-sense, ‘Charlie, and I think one of us had better cross the herring-pool, as they call the Atlantic, and see after this fortune for ourselves. If we delay, somebody else is sure to step in. As to letters and cablegrams, as they call ’em, they are expensive and unsatisfactory, and one personal interview is worth a hundred of ’em. A month, or less, would settle the whole matter.’

‘Where is the money to come from?’ asked Belle. ‘And how could you leave the farm, father, or Charlie his patients?’

‘Practically, dear Belle, I have no patients,’ hemmed Charlie, with a sigh. ‘I have had a few poor souls who can’t afford to pay, and, since Amy’s death, I haven’t the heart to look for rich ones.’

‘No patients, dear! Then how have you and the children lived?’ asked Belle.

‘I have been helping Dr. Silver again. He has never, he says, had an assistant to suit him since I left, and was glad to have me back. It is difficult to begin a practice in London where there are medical men in every street, and I wish I had never started on my own account. As you always said, I should have done better in the country; but neither dearest Amy nor I cared to return to this county, and we had no connection elsewhere.’

‘Old Weatherley would have put an end

to you both if you had,' laughed Mr. Dauncey; but Belle was silent.

She had wanted her brother to accept a partnership offered him by a medical man to whom he had been apprenticed, in their nearest town, Harborough. But she loved him too dearly to upbraid him. Indeed, she had been his slave from childhood, as many a good sister is of many a brother infinitely her inferior. He was six or seven years her senior, she being four-and-twenty and he turned thirty. He was what is called essentially lovable. Everybody loved Charlie Dauncey when he was a boy, and, unfortunately, when he grew to man's estate, one fair damsel loved him too well for the gratification of her father, Squire Weatherley of Weatherley Court. This was the Amy whose loss he so deeply deplored, and who had been a tender and faithful wife to him and a loving mother to his children, despite certain inequalities

of position, which a country squire with broad acres and long pedigree was justified in resenting.

‘I don’t quite understand how you have managed to exist on what Dr. Silver paid you,’ said Belle, feeling her way through what she knew to be a difficult path.

‘We could not, Belle,’ replied Charlie, avoiding his sister’s inquiring glance. ‘Dear Amy was obliged to sell out.’

‘Then you have been living on her principal? Ah, Charlie, that was scarcely right,’ said Belle.

‘What were we to do? We could not starve, and I believed that I should get a practice in time. Of course, when she was so ill, money was absolutely necessary. We knew you could not help us, and her father would not; at least, we did not ask him.’

‘You have not spent all the two thou-

sand pounds left her by her aunt ?' asked Belle.

'No ; there are still a few hundreds left, which I want to save for the children, if possible,' returned Charlie, humbly ; and, when he took to humility, he was quite irresistible, particularly to Belle.

'Why bother over a few hundreds when we have thousands just about to fall into our lap, like so many ripe apples that tumble into Belle's apron as soon as she holds it out,' broke in Mr. Dauncey. 'Let us discuss what we had better do to secure them, before somebody else stretches out the apron. Ripe golden pippins are not to be despised. Ha, ha !'

'By no means,' added Charlie, clinching his father's argument by once more looking Belle in the face. 'I will go to America and prove that we are next-of-kin, if you, dear Belle, will take care of the children while I am away. For all

our sakes we must not let this chance of bettering our fortune slip. Father says he has letters somewhere of Jabez Dauncey's that would prove his identity and convince any lawyer in the world that he is his nearest relative. Surely you will not throw obstacles in the way, dear Belle ?'

'I wonder what Miss Dulcey would say ?' suggested Belle. 'Of course I would gladly have the dear children here, but, if you throw up a certainty for an uncertainty, what is to become of them eventually ?'

'It cannot be an uncertainty, Belle,' said Mr. Dauncey, who was restlessly moving about the room. 'One of us two must go, if we pawn the family plate ; and a voyage to America would set up Charlie, who looks as if he had swallowed all the pills in Dr. Silver's surgery.'

'If you think I look ill, what will you say to the children ? Under any circum-

stances, may they come here for a change?’

‘Of course they may, Charlie. I have always been longing to have them,’ said Belle. ‘It seems quite unnatural that they should never have been here; but dear Amy would not force either them or herself upon the notice of Mr. Weatherley, or any member of the family, and always refused when I asked her to bring them. I don’t wonder, for she would not have liked to have visited us and not have gone to the Court; and the squire is so hot-tempered and odd, that he, possibly, might not have asked her, even though he had forgiven her.’

‘My patience, if I have any left, you are not beginning that old story again! Let that hare sit,’ interrupted Mr. Dauncey. ‘A little novelty would be good for us all, here in Hollyfield, and the whole village will be in a commotion when it hears that Charlie has gone to America,

and the children arrived at their paternal grandfather's.'

'It certainly would be a boon,' laughed Belle. 'We have had no sensation since old Mrs. Norton forbade Susie's banns, and Mr. Burmester told her to come to the vestry after service. Had the church tower been struck by lightning, the congregation could not have been more electrified.'

'I never heard of that. How did it end?' asked Charlie.

'The young couple followed your example, Charlie,' said Mr. Dauncey, who was rather fond of taking the words out of Belle's mouth; 'they got spliced in another parish. You and Amy, thanks to Miss Dulcey, were married from her house in town. Timothy Wise and Susie went off to Shireham, and were made man and wife there.'

'It is wrong to marry without parental consent,' sighed Charlie. 'One acknow-

ledges that when too late. It made dear Amy very unhappy ; but it was my fault. And when I think of the past I am wretched.'

'Then think of the present, and lay your shoulder to the American wheel,' exclaimed Mr. Dauncey, with an impatient gesture and exclamation, while Belle put her hand into her brother's.

She felt that there was no more for her to say on this weighty question. It seemed as if happiness, if not life, were over at present for her beloved Charlie ; and, forgetting prudential scruples, she began to think that any decided change would be beneficial to him—anything, in short, that would divert his mind from self. He must be saved from melancholia at all risks, and his children from withering away in London.

Belle had borne so many burdens in her time that she did not fear additional ones,

as far as she was concerned ; but she did fear debt. Her life was a continual struggle to keep out of it, and to persuade her father not to 'borrow of Peter to pay Paul,' as the saying is. Like many men, he was too fond of the lawyers, and whenever he was in a strait was apt to have recourse to a certain unscrupulous limb of the law, whom Belle dreaded, and who lived at Harborough, the market-town nearest Hollyfield.

'Am I to be going to bed without prayers?' said an aggrieved voice, as the door was partially unclosed.

'Not for the world, Molly,' cried Belle, starting up. 'Where is Jim?'

'He did a'most fall into the fire for sleep, Miss Belle, so I was sending him off to bed,' replied Molly, whose eyes looked like ferrets from the rubbings they had received to keep them open.

Mr. Dauncey who was much afraid of

Molly, prepared at once for family worship, and a day of much anxiety was closed, as all days should close, with Holy Writ and prayer.

CHAPTER III.

MISS DULCEY.

BREAKFAST at Castle Farm was at half-past seven, and Charlie had some difficulty in being in time. He knew of old that his father was punctual at meals, so, when Belle pummelled at the door of his room for the third time, he jumped out of bed, dressed hastily, and went downstairs. His father was already fuming because he was ten minutes late, but when he saw Charlie's pale face he relented, and said,

‘My dear boy, you do want rest and change. The sooner you start for Montreal the better.’

As may be supposed, Montreal, Jabez Dauncey, and the next-of-kin had haunted the dreams and thoughts of that small family all the night, and the theme was resumed and discussed all breakfast-time. Even Belle forgot the haymakers in the engrossing topic, and it quite superseded the usually paramount one—the weather and the crops. Charlie was to return to London by the evening express, and the preliminaries of his subsequent proceedings had to be settled. Belle soon discovered which way the wind lay, and knew that she could not change it. Her father was always a problem to her, for he was as obstinate as he was vacillating, and she was never sure what turn his restless mind might take. The breakfast things were still on the table when there was a ponderous knock at the front door.

‘That is Miss Dulcey, I am sure,’ cried Belle, jumping up and hastening to an-

swer it. 'Ah! I am so glad you have come!' she added, embracing and almost extinguishing the individual who had rapped so resolutely.

'Miss Dulcey!' exclaimed Mr. Dauncey to his son. 'What will she say? We may as well go to the bottom of the Atlantic as offend her. Everybody expects a fortune from Miss Dulcey; and certainly Belle, as her god-daughter, has as good a chance as another.'

'I shall never forget her kindness to us; though it might have been better had she——' began Charlie, pausing in his speech, as a little lady entered the room, followed by Belle, who was twice her height.

Father and son hastened to meet her, and, when she had shaken hands with them, she apologised for appearing so early.

'Miss Dulcey is never too early any-

where; and we are always honoured by a visit,' said Mr. Dauncey, assuming his best manners.

'I heard that Charlie was here, and came to see him, thinking he might leave by the early train,' returned Miss Dulcey, taking the low, cushioned seat. 'You look ill. How are your children? And what brought you down so unexpectedly?'

There was no uncertainty in Miss Dulcey's manner or speech. She went direct to the point, and when Charlie hesitated slightly in his reply to her last question she interrupted him by,

'I guessed as much. I saw the same advertisement. It must be your cousin Jabez, Mr. Dauncey. But advertisements are often humbugs, and I don't believe in any of 'em.'

A long discussion ensued, in which Miss Dulcey displayed a shrewd common sense, which, together with her position, gave

her the not always enviable post of general umpire and referee in village matters. She was called indifferently, 'our little lady' and 'Miss Dulcey' by the neighbourhood.

She owed the first of these names to her being small of stature, the latter to her having the Christian name of Dulcibella. Hersurname was Weatherley, she being half-sister of Squire Weatherley, of the Court. Although, as we have said, really 'a little lady,' she was no dwarf. She was well-formed, light, active, and full of life. She was dark, with a pair of eyes that looked you through and through, and never failed to discover any reserved thought if there were one. She had none herself, and woe be to the man, woman, or child who tried to deceive her. Nobody ever meddled with her age, for she had always looked the same, and everyone forgot whether she were fifteen or fifty. She might have been either, for her figure was girlish, her dress

staid. She generally wore black, and always bonnets, except in her garden, where she had an abnormally big hat, which seemed to cover her all over. There was nothing peculiar or eccentric either in her dress or manners, and yet people chose to call her 'quite an original,' which she certainly was.

Her originality consisted in her having made up her mind on all points, religious and secular, and in enunciating her opinions with no uncertain sound. She had never any patience with Mr. Dauncey, and would have quarrelled with him whenever they met, had he not been polite enough to yield to her, and her alone; for was she not Belle's godmother, and might she not, if she chose, prove a fairy godmother to the girl?

She was very fond of Belle, partly for her own sake, partly for her mother's, who had been her dear friend. The Daunceys

were a respectable, if somewhat decayed, family, and in former days ranked with those magnates known as country gentlemen; and Belle's mother had been the daughter of the vicar of Hollyfield, who preceded Mr. Burmester, the present incumbent. So Miss Dulcey had stood sponsor to Belle, who inherited her name, which they divided for the convenience of everyday life. She was also fond of Charlie, and had incurred the dire displeasure of her half-brother by allowing his marriage with his daughter to take place from her house in town. There was, indeed, no good blood between her and the squire, who would fain have grasped her fortune as well as his own. This he could not do, for it was inherited from her mother, and had reverted to her on their father's death, who had been twice married. The squire had enough of his own, inasmuch as the Court and all its appurtenances belonged to him.

Miss Dulcey spent her income royally between town and country; for, while professing to hate the noise and bustle of London, she yet visited it every season, either renting a small house, or flat, for some two or three months. This gave her an additional influence over her neighbours, who seldom or never went to town, and who listened with admiration to her scathing remarks on the follies of the age. Nothing is so easy as to abuse the century in which we live; and the nineteenth, though better than its predecessors, has to endure much calumny. As if God were not above all, moving the wheels of the very complicated machinery!

Miss Dulcey let the Daunceys, father and son, pour out all they had to say on the American question without much interruption. An occasional 'Ah, indeed!—what folly!—stuff o' nonsense!' and the like were her only remarks, to which Belle

listened, with eyes and soul centred in her small person, as if she really were the Hollyfield oracle people called her. But when the case for the defence was ended, and the two men paused for breath, Belle was astounded at the judge's summing up. She had expected quite a different opinion, more in accordance with her own. Miss Dulcey sat erect in her corner of the window-seat, looking from one to the other of the special pleaders, and nodding occasionally; but they averted their eyes from her, knowing their interpenetrating quality. When they had finished, however, they looked at her. Her judgment was enunciated in short, sharp, incisive sentences.

‘I agree with you both. You are Jabez Dauncey's heirs. There can't be two of that name. And an ugly name it is! Not so preposterous as Dulcibella, however. One of you must see after the money.

Charlie has nothing better to do, apparently, and may as well idle at Montreal as in London. I always say men are the most useless of created animals—made to give trouble to women. Excuse me, Mr. Dauncey, but Belle quite agrees with me. Charlie will leave three encumbrances on her already overweighted hands; all the same, the children must come here, and he must go to America.'

'Bravo, Miss Dulcey; I always say you are the most sensible lady I ever saw,' laughed Mr. Dauncey, who had risen and was walking to and fro.

'Would you mind sitting down, Mr. Dauncey? I can never collect my ideas when anything is in motion before me. Thank you.'

'But, Miss Dulcey——' began Belle.

'Indeed, Miss Dulcey,' interrupted Charlie, 'I am truly miserable.'

'You look so, Charlie; but explain.'

‘I have done my best, but everything has been against me. I ought never to have lured dearest Amy from her home; I ought never to have married her. Our positions were so different, and perhaps she would not have died if she hadn’t changed hers.’

‘Life and death are not in our hands, Charlie, and she told me she should die if she was parted from you. You upbraid me in upbraiding yourself, and what’s the good? You met first at my house, fool that I was; and you were married from my house. I believe she was happy.’

‘She was, indeed she was, Miss Dulcey. She had everything she wanted; and, oh, I loved her, I loved her better than my life!’

Here Charlie’s long-suppressed feelings gave way, and he burst into tears. It is said that it is terrible to see a man cry, but Charlie’s grief was so natural, that it

might be called womanly. Kind Miss Dulcey slipped from her rather high seat, and went to him. She laid her hand on his shoulder and tried to comfort him.

‘I know you loved her, Charlie. She is in heaven, so we won’t lament her. You must be brave for her sake and the children’s.’

‘I will. How kind you are, Miss Dulcey. I thought you would upbraid me. But I did my utmost to save her, God knows.’

A sob from Belle, generally so stout-hearted, roused Charlie.

‘Dear Belle, I am so sorry. Forgive me,’ he added; and they all recovered self-possession by degrees.

‘A voyage will set him up,’ said Miss Dulcey, cheerfully. ‘All my friends go abroad when they have a finger-ache. I hear of nothing but massage, and the grape cure, and the water cure, and the sun and

air cure, and you can get a touch of 'em all in America.'

'And, before all, the money cure, Miss Dulcey,' put in Mr. Dauncey. 'If we could only get that fortune we could snap our fingers at the world, and be as grand as the new tenant of Harborough Hall, who made his money, they say, out of shoddy, whatever that may be.'

'A truly respectable trade, Mr. Dauncey, and one that would suit Belle, for it utilises what other folk throw away. I daresay, if you got this fortune to-morrow, you'd spend it the next day.'

'Not with Belle to square my accounts, ma'am. She'd pretty soon pull me up.'

'And what does she think of the advertisement?'

Miss Dulcey hopped over to Belle, who was sitting apart listening, and repeated her question.

'I don't see where the money is to come

from, Miss Dulcey,' said Belle. 'Spending one fortune to get another is no good, and we've got no ready money.'

'The celebrated Holloway, the pill and ointment man, said he spent one fortune to make two,' replied Miss Dulcey. 'Come with me, Belle, and we'll talk it over, as only women can. Men are no good in money matters, nor in any other matter, for that much; but one must humour 'em, poor demented creatures. She shall be back in no time, Mr. Dauncey. Good-bye, Charlie! Keep up your spirits and try not to grieve over spilt milk. No good in that. I have just given little Polly Norton a shilling; she was sobbing her heart out over an upset and empty milk-can almost as big as herself. We have our country arabs, or juvenile gymnasts, or whatever you may call 'em, just as hardly used as the town ones. It has been the same ever since the world was made. Why,

Jeremiah laments over the children that "stumbled under the wood." I wonder whether that blessed man, Lord Shaftesbury, ever thought of that verse in Lamentations when he was struggling through his short-hour Bills?

'I daresay he did, for he knew the Bible by heart,' replied Belle, who had put on her hat, and was waiting for Miss Dulcey.

They hurried away together, leaving the two men to wonder 'what Miss Dulcey was up to now.' In the paddock a huge turkey-cock flew at Miss Dulcey, who turned and faced valiantly, while Belle sought to drive him away. It was curious to see the little lady poking at the huge bird with her large parasol and laughing heartily.

'He knows what a contempt I have for his sex, and always gobbles at me. Look, Belle, what a magnificent tail he

spreads out! All show, just like the men! But he has something to be proud of, which is more than I can say for them. All self, all self! Yours are fine examples, Belle. But poor Charlie must be humoured, or he'll follow Amy.'

'Oh, Miss Dulcey!' exclaimed Belle, who had made the turkey-cock turn tail, and was laughing at his proud mien as he strutted away.

'Make haste, Belle. I daresay you're wanted in a hundred places,' said Miss Dulcey, hurrying through the gate and up the road.

Belle had some difficulty in keeping pace with her, for she was the most rapid of walkers. She did not pause until she reached a flight of picturesque stone steps, overshadowed by an arch of fine trees. She ran up these followed by Belle. At their summit was a smooth path leading, through a well-mown lawn, to a low, two-

storeyed house, literally embowered in creeping plants and flowers. It was a garden of roses, and over the porch and from the pointed windows fell garlands of trailing and blossoming branches. The lawn wandered down to the fields, and beyond were low hills, both near and distant, which formed a sweet setting to the sweetest of pictures. Borders, full of summer flowers, surrounded the lawn, and light iron railings alone divided it from the fields, so that it was hard to know where the garden ended and the meadows began. This was Miss Dulcey's home, and she called it the Gables, because of its Elizabethan points and eaves.

From it, on one side, the church and the vicarage were seen, seated, like itself, on a hill, and beneath it the red roof of the school-house. Miss Dulcey was wont to say that when she was ill or superannuated she would have reminders of her duty both

to God and man, since she was placed just between church and school, and could hear the bells and the choir pealing from the one, and the children's monotonous reading and jubilant singing from the other.

‘Quite near enough without a telephone. That must be a Satanic invention, for it makes people deaf to what’s going on around them, just to listen to what’s passing afar off,’ she said.

She led Belle through the porch into what she called her summer drawing-room. This was a small apartment formed out of the hall and passage, which was open all the summer, and closed with warm curtains and various other contrivances during the winter months. Its window looked out upon the lawn and distant prospect, and through it intruded many delightful flowers. It admitted also the echoes of the psalms and hymns aforementioned,

together with a chorus of bird-minstrelsy not to be described by mortal pen. Belle loved this room almost as much as her godmother did, and some of her happiest and most peaceful hours had been spent there.

No sooner was she seated in a low basket-work chair, near Miss Dulcey's well-covered writing-table, than the latter made known what had been the reason of her taking her away so unceremoniously from her brother.

‘Of course, Belle, I see things just as you do,’ she began. ‘There are difficulties—there always are difficulties. There is no money ; there never is when it is wanted. Now I, who am a single woman, and who never in my whole life wished to be a double one, have more money than I can spend. I mean to frank Charlie to America ; in the first place, by God’s help, to save his life ; and, in the second, to enable him

to claim this fortune. Now, don't interrupt me, and lose time. One may be too prudent, and perhaps that's one of your faults, Belle. You are over-anxious, because your father is—well, my dear, you know what I think of him and men in general, so I won't repeat. I agree with Scripture about "vain repetitions," and I only wish all my fellow-sinners did; but we won't enter upon that question.'

'But, dear Miss Dulcey——' interrupted Belle.

'Not a word, Belle. Excuse me for a moment. Just go and call Ben, while I run upstairs.'

Miss Dulcey disappeared into what was virtually the hall, whence a well-carpeted staircase led to the upper storey. Belle hurried round to what was actually the principal entrance, to which such 'carriage company' as visited the Gables, necessarily came. The main road below the flight of

steps led to this, and the door opened on the inner hall.

‘ Ben, Ben !’ cried Belle, at the top of her voice.

‘ Yes, miss, here I be. What now ? ’Tis always Ben,’ came from a voice somewhere below.

The coachhouse and stable and coachman’s house were on a level with the road, hidden from view, and Ben came through a side path in the shrubbery. Ben was Miss Dulcey’s man-of-all-work, and was a strong, sturdy specimen of his class. He had been grooming the pony and brushing up the carriage, so, at that moment, was not at his best.

‘ Miss Dulcey wants you, Ben,’ said Belle. ‘ I think she is in a hurry.’

‘ She always is ; but she must wait,’ returned Ben, whose virtue it was never to be in a hurry. ‘ Make so bold, Miss Belle, but how’s Molly ?’

‘She’s first-rate, Ben. You haven’t been to see her for a long time.’

‘What’s the good, Miss Belle? She always sends me away with a flea in my ear. The last time I saw her was when I took the parcel from mistress to you, and she said, “She’d plenty to do, if I hadn’t,” and I said to myself, “I’ll never go a-nigh her again.”’

Belle laughed, and Ben joined; but their merriment was interrupted by an imperative call of ‘Ben! Belle! Where on earth are you?’

Belle ran off, and Ben followed, with ‘measured step and slow.’ Miss Dulcey always said he was an agricultural labourer spoilt, and she had been the means of diverting his talents from their natural bent. All the same, he was a valuable servant.

‘Will you have the pony-carriage ready to drive Mr. Charles Dauncey to the station

in time for the express, Ben ?' said Miss Dulcey. ' Now, you can't complain that I haven't given you proper notice.'

' Mr. Charlie ! I'll drive him with pleasure, mistress,' returned Ben, with unusually brisk intonation. ' I'll be at Castle Farm at a quarter-past four to the minute, Miss Belle.'

' Which is the greater attraction, Charlie or Molly ?' asked Miss Dulcey, as Ben disappeared. ' You can go also, Belle. It must be a broken day, and you must make the best of it. Give that to Charlie, and tell him to come back with flesh on his bones, and Jabez Dauncey's fortune in his pocket. Not a word. Good-bye, dear. I am due at the vicarage, and shall have a lecture from Mrs. Burmester as long as to-day and to-morrow. The best of women, but sententious ; and, if there is anything that riles me, it is long sentences in a sermon ; and doesn't she preach !'

Miss Dulcey thrust into Belle's hands one of those charming grey bags with white tape strings that they give you at the banks when you are lucky enough to carry away money. Before Belle could utter a word, she was speeding over the gravel path, and, while the girl still stood irresolute, she was down the steps, and up the hill on her way to the vicarage.

‘What can I say?—what can I do?’ ejaculated Belle, feeling the crisp bank notes and gold which the bag contained. ‘I must give it to Charlie, and what will he do with it?’

She did not pause to think out her problem, but hurried back with her treasure to Castle Farm.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. MULREADY.

BEN and Molly were the most punctual of men and maids of all work. Your steady-going, methodical people are generally punctual, and get through an amount of labour incredible to the vivacious scatter-brain. But they will not bear either contradiction or interruption ; they must have their own way. Thus, so long as Ben was allowed to pursue 'the daily round' without being chased out of his circle, all went well at the Gables ; and so long as Molly was not hurried in her 'common task,' everything went smoothly at Castle Farm.

But disturb their routine, and you disturbed their tempers. Unfortunately, they had a mistress and master who were not as particular on this head as they might have been, and their equanimity never attained that perfection to which, in their humble way, they aimed.

We are told that lovers, to be constant, should be 'opposites,' whatever that may mean; but Ben and Molly had been attracted to one another by similarity. Not that they were exactly 'lovers,' for no sooner did Ben find time to make a polite speech to Molly than she snubbed him by telling him that she had no time to listen to him. This state of things had been going on for some years, and Belle, who understood it, sympathised with Ben, and occasionally upbraided Molly for her unceremonious conduct.

'Why for I make a fool of myself and idle my time?' was all that Molly

said ; and Miss Dulcey greatly admired her.

Ben was at the farm precisely at a quarter-past four. To see him at his best, he was to be contemplated as coachman ; and, as he sat awaiting Belle and Charlie, even Molly's hard heart was softened to admiration. His livery was perfect, if plain ; the pony-carriage was spotless ; and as to Miss Saucy, the pony, she was groomed till she must have been tired of the operation, if he was not. Moreover, he was not a bad-looking man, if a trifle heavy.

‘ Ah ! here you are ! ’ said Molly, appearing suddenly beneath the porch. ‘ Well ! you are dressed up just to drive Mr. Charlie to the station ! ’

‘ I haven't seen you for a long time, Molly,’ returned Ben, glancing slyly at the smart blue bow in the cap, and the best apron.

I s'pose we've both had plenty to do.

I have. But you might a-found time to say a civil word to one.'

It dawned upon Ben's dull brain that he had made a hit without intending it. If absence had not exactly 'made her heart grow fonder,' it had stirred up her feelings.

'I've been too busy. If you can afford to lose time, I can't,' said Ben, with an amount of sagacity that neither Miss Dulcey nor Belle would have credited him with.

Further disclosures were cut short by the appearance of Charlie and Belle, followed by their father.

'Sit in front with Ben, he will like it,' whispered Belle, getting into the rumble, while her brother wished his father and Molly good-bye.

'Make so bold, Mr. Charles, but we shall be late,' said Ben; and Charlie was instantly at his side.

'Good luck! good luck!' shouted Mr.

Dauncey, while Molly ran to open the gate.

Two of the farm men were there already, anxious to have a word with Charlie, whom everybody loved. But Ben drove through with a side nod at Molly, declaring that there was not a moment to lose. Still, as Charlie knew, he would not have hurried either Miss Saucy or himself to save the train. Miss Saucy's steps were never quickened unless her mistress was driving, and then she knew she had her master, which sounds an anomalous confusion of sex.

It was a three miles' drive, and Ben talked stolidly to Charlie all the way. The haymakers were busy everywhere, and the breezes wafted the delicious scent of the new-mown hay to the inmates of the pony-carriage. Charlie turned to Belle with a half sigh as he inhaled it, and pointed to the wild roses in the hedgerows and the wild flowers on the banks, with almost more

pain than pleasure. He was melancholy, despite the 'next-of-kin.'

They reached the station just in time.

'Write as soon as you can fix the day,' said Belle, as she embraced her brother fervently, heedless of spectators.

There was only one, in fact, and he thrust his hand into the carriage to bid Charlie good-bye just as the train was about to start.

'Your flowers are more beautiful than ever,' said Charlie, grasping the offered hand.

Belle stood, with eyes brimful of tears, to watch the train until it was out of sight, then turned slowly round. She remained a few moments alone on the platform, and then she was greeted by a friend. It was Mulready, the station-master.

'Your brother did not stay long, Miss Dauncey. I hope he brought no bad news,' he said.

‘ I hope not—I think not—unless a possible fortune is bad news,’ replied Belle, smiling, and brushing off the tears.

‘ I saw the advertisement. May I gather you a nosegay?’ said the station-master.

No one knew anything of Mr. Mulready save that he was a gentleman, and had wonderful taste for flowers. Indeed, Orchardson Station was a lodge, not in ‘ a vast wilderness,’ but in a beautiful garden. Every inch of ground was utilised for flower-beds. All the length of the platform there was a border within the railings, full of pinks, mignonette, sweet peas, and every scented summer blossom ; while the slope, through which the path to the platform wound, was a maze of tiny beds, in which were planted bulbs or roots according to the season. At the moment they overflowed with the treasures of summer, and travellers wondered at the taste displayed in the arrangement of colour, and asked who the artist could be.

Orchardson Station always carried off the first prize in the competition for the neatest and prettiest stations, and was the admiration of all the passengers on that line of railway. Its one porter and one telegraph boy took a commendable pride in the flowers, and spent every leisure moment in aiding the master in transplanting, bedding-out, watering, pruning and weeding the immaculate parterre. To them Mr. Mulready transferred such prizes in money as fell to his share, and they had, therefore, an interest in the work beyond the mere pleasure of hearing people say theirs was the most beautiful station ever seen.

The small house attached to the verandah, which served as a waiting-room, was also as well concealed by creeping plants as was the Gables, and in every available corner flower-pots protruded, the contents of which were to displace the existing

garden-growth when their turn came.

Belle sat down on the one iron seat at the end of the platform, while her friend, Mr. Mulready, gathered her nosegay. Although her back was turned to the white pinks and mignonette, their perfume reached her, and helped to dry the tears and restore the smiles so natural to her bright temper of mind. No sooner were her eyes clear again, than she was at Mr. Mulready's side.

‘I must not keep the pony-carriage waiting,’ she said. ‘Ah! what a lovely posy! I can’t make my flowers grow as you do.’

‘I wonder at that, for you are all sunshine,’ he replied. ‘I will carry them to the carriage.’

She led the way up the grey-gravelled path between the wee flower-beds, and he followed. Ben and the pony were becoming impatient. They were outside the

railing that bounded the station, and Miss Saucy was munching some of the large leaves of the sunflowers that grew within it. This border of sunflowers was a gorgeous sight in autumn, much admired by the country-folk. Mr. Mulready, having helped Belle into the carriage, laid his nosegay on her lap. Her thanks were as warm as her nature, and Mr. Mulready promised to supply her with bedding-out plants, and to bring them himself to the farm, and help her to put them into the ground—when he had time.

‘That is never,’ she said.

‘True,’ he returned. ‘Although I seem to have an easy post, it is so responsible that I am always afraid something may happen while I absent myself. If I had not been here yesterday, you would not have received the telegram.’

Ben turned Miss Saucy’s head, and Belle nodded her good-bye. Mr. Mulready stood

at the gate to watch her, and smiled when she looked round and nodded again. He admired her almost as much as he did his flowers, because she, like them, was a child of nature. He hated artificiality, and abjured forced and hybrid plants. He was reckoned a strange man, and was so far peculiar that he made few acquaintances, and kept much to himself, his flowers, his duties, and a few books, which he read and re-read when leisure allowed him.

The readers of to-day will question the latter clause, and ask if there still exists the man who reads a book twice, or indeed once thoroughly. But Mr. Mulready certainly did. And this not because he was too old to care for anything new, for he was not an old man; but because the bent of his mind seemed to lie in one direction. This was rather a backward than a forward one, and, when people tried to run him to

ground, he said he could not keep pace with the times. That was why he came to Orchardson, they said, for assuredly the world there was slow enough. The country people liked him, for he was patient with them, their children, their poultry, and their parcels when they came back from market ; and they all declared him to be a real gentleman, though he was reduced to be a station-master, since nobody but a gentleman would be as particular in helping third-class passengers as he was first. Moreover, they liked his looks. He was a fine manly fellow, and neither gentle nor simple ventured to take a liberty with him.

‘He be a queer chap, Miss Belle,’ said Ben, when Miss Saucy had got into her regular trot, and was making her way homewards. ‘I can’t get the sunflowers to grow as he do. Miss Dulcey be always bringing of him up, and I says that, if his

sunflowers be finer than ours, our lilies do beat his hollow. He ha'ant got nothing to compare wi' our lilies, and I'll stand to it to my dying day.'

'But yours is such a grand garden, Ben, and his such a little one,' said Belle, holding up her nosegay for the admiration of a group of cottage children who were curtseying and smiling as she passed them.

'Just so, Miss Belle. He'll never get so many prizes as I've got, if he was to try at all the flower-shows from here to London.'

Belle found it difficult to keep up a conversation with Ben, and responded to his monotonous talk with absent monosyllables.

'She be thinking of Mr. Charlie, who do look uncommon bad,' reflected Ben, for she was usually the most chatty of companions. So he, too, fell to thinking of

Molly and his multifarious duties, and was silent.

Belle's thoughts were not cheerful, and her usually clear mind was perplexed. Even Miss Dulcey's approbation could not force her into the belief that Fortune's wheel was turning in favour of her father. He had been always what is called 'unlucky'—in other words, he had never stuck to work. In this sense, luck or unluck is generally in one's own hands. Belle thought over his career, and wondered what would come of this last temptation. He had inherited a nice little fortune in houses and land from his father, had been well-educated, and came, as we have said, of a respectable family. He had begun life as agent to a nobleman of large property, and held the appointment until he developed a turn for speculation and an unfortunate aptitude for having recourse to the lawyers. Having got into difficul-

ties, he borrowed money, mortgaged his little property, and otherwise impoverished himself and his family. Then he took to farming, and rented Castle Farm of Squire Weatherley. Here he might have made a decent livelihood, had he been content to 'let well enough alone'; but, like all speculators, he dabbled in so many extraneous matters that neither he nor Belle knew exactly the state of his affairs. One thing, however, Belle knew, which was that he was much under the influence, if not in the power, of Lawyer Pearce, of Harborough. This gentleman had taken a great fancy to Belle, who disliked him quite as much as he liked her. This was unfortunate, as he was a bachelor, and had the best house, and, indeed, the best position, in that flourishing market-town.

Belle's meditations were interrupted at her own gate. She tried to arrest Ben by

bidding him stop and let her get out. But Ben was not to be arrested; he drove her triumphantly up to the door. He had espied a certain blue bow in the distance, the wearer of which was feeding the poultry, so he flourished his whip over Miss Saucy's back, and circumvented Belle. She wanted to save him the trouble of crossing the paddock by the somewhat ill-kept road, but, with Molly in sight, trouble became a pleasure to him. His heart almost palpitated as she actually ran breathlessly up to the pony-carriage, followed by the poultry, for had she not an apron full of food?

‘Pearce, the lawyer, is in the parlour with master,’ she said, significantly, without condescending to give Ben a look.

‘How long has he been there?’ asked Belle, ruefully.

‘Over an hour. He do be waiting for tea. It is ready, and I was making some

baking-cakes, and have put out the best china, and it do look beautiful.'

Molly favoured Mr. Pearce, and was not indifferent to the shillings he occasionally gave her.

'Thank you, Ben. Will you tell Miss Dulcey that Charlie and I were very grateful for the carriage, and that I will be with her early to-morrow morning?' said Belle. 'Good-bye, Miss Saucy,' she added, patting the pony.

'Here's a piece of bread and an apple, Miss Belle,' said Molly, who knew Miss Saucy's taste, and abstracted these delicacies from her pocket.

'We haven't got no time now,' said Ben, trying to turn the pony's head, though personally complimented by the attention to his charge.

But Belle, Molly, and Miss Saucy prevailed, for not a step would they move till apple and bread were duly munched.

Molly glanced quite triumphantly at Ben, whose heart relented at sight of the blue bow and black eyes, and who returned her nod when at last he drove off with a 'Good-afternoon, Molly.'

'Carry in the cakes, and ask Mr. Pearce if he would like a fresh egg, Molly No ; just boil three, and say I'll be down directly,' said Belle, running upstairs.

She had a pretty bed-room, furnished with old-fashioned chintz, which was, like the bureau, a sort of heirloom. The window looked out on her little flower-garden, where 'some day' Mr. Mulready had promised to help her plant the flowers he should bring. It was the sunny side of the house, and the room, like Belle herself, was generally bright. When the weather was cloudy, the gaily-coloured chintz made it look cheerful, to say nothing of all the presents that Belle had received ever since she was born. These, and a variety of pictures,

were arranged on walls, mantelshelf, and bookcase; and she always believed that it was the prettiest room in the habitable globe. She did not now pause to see that it was quite neat, as she usually did, but threw her hat and mantle hastily on the bed, and stood a moment with clasped hands and perplexed air.

‘What can have brought him here? What is his next move?’ she asked, half-aloud. ‘If father would only consult Mr. Burmester instead of him, I should be more at ease, for he would get good advice free of six-and-eightpences. And yet I cannot tell why I distrust him, for he appears to be interested in all our affairs, and even wants to make me the medium of settling them.’

She almost laughed as she came to this final conclusion, and went to her glass to arrange her somewhat disordered hair. No woman is indifferent to the opinions of the

other sex, and Belle was not strong-minded in the usual acceptation of the term; so she made the best of herself, and hurried downstairs to discover what had brought Mr. Pearce to Castle Farm.

CHAPTER V.

PEARCE, THE LAWYER.

WHEN Belle reached the dining-room, she found her father and Mr. Pearce in full talk. She heard the words, 'I could run over if necessary' from the latter, and wondered what they meant, and supposed they alluded to future visits to the farm. He rose and hurried to meet her, with the alacrity of one who had been expecting her arrival. He could scarcely have encountered a more comely maiden. Her cheeks were red with air and exercise, her blue eyes beamed with the light which a

good conscience poured into them, her movements were brisk, and her figure lithe and active. She was the personification of usefulness.

Mr. Pearce was also full of activity, both mental and bodily. He was a little man, blue-eyed, fair-haired, fresh-coloured, and decidedly good-looking. He had a well-tended moustache, and was dressed with great care: a man that any girl might fancy, and that half the young ladies of Harborough did fancy. His gait was easy, his figure slim, his manners polished.

Why did she not fancy him? She could scarcely tell; but there was an antagonism towards him in her nature which she attributed to various causes. The primary was that he was her father's mortgagee, and lent him money at five per cent. whenever he required it. She reasoned with herself that this was no just cause of dislike; for the interest was not excessive, and, if he

had not undertaken the mortgages, some one else would ; for her father's small property might be made valuable by other than himself. There were a few secondary causes for her mistrust of so glib, agreeable, and even fascinating a man as Mr. Pearce ; but these must be left to develop themselves.

Belle took her place at the tea-table, he his at her side ; Mr. Dauncey sat opposite ; Rover, who was jealous and suspicious, forced his way between her and the lawyer, while Molly brought in the whitest and best-buttered baking-cakes Mr. Pearce had ever seen. He never omitted to compliment Molly, and even declared her fresh eggs to be boiled more exactly to time than any other cook's eggs in the country. It pleased Molly to be called 'cook' ; for maid-of-all-work was a term she, together with many of her compeers, disliked. Molly was not without her vanities, and that day

was one of triumph; for Ben had said that ‘Good afternoon, Molly,’ with a tone quite peculiar; and Pearce, the lawyer, as she called him, Welsh fashion, had praised her baking-cakes.

‘I saw the advertisement for the next-of-kin in the *Times* this morning, and ran over to see if I could be of service,’ said Mr. Pearce to Belle, helping himself to half a teacup of cream. ‘Your cream is too delicious. I am always ashamed of myself when I come here, I eat and drink so much.’

‘You are quite welcome,’ said Belle, ‘and we are glad when people enjoy our country fare. But don’t you really think that this American journey is a wild-goose chase? Of course it will do Charlie good, but how do we know that there is a fortune to be had, or that Jabez Dauncey is father’s cousin?’

‘I will find that out. I will telegraph

to my friends at New York, and put them on the scent. Then I will write to the Montreal lawyers, and pave the way for your brother's arrival. He should be first in the field. Then I will prepare a document, signed by influential people, that he can take with him, to the effect that Jabez Dauncey was brought up with your father; was his first cousin; and that he, your brother, and yourself, are the last of the family, and the unquestionable heirs to whatever fortune he left.'

'And all this will require money, and we have none,' said Belle.

'Oh! that can be managed,' returned Pearce, with a glance across the table.

'Charlie's journey is franked, Belle,' said Mr. Dauncey, averting his eyes both from his daughter and the lawyer. 'Mr. Pearce is kind enough just to make enquiries through people he knows on the spot, and, if the worst come to the worst, there is

no harm done. Charlie's health will be set up by the voyage, and if he remained in London he would die; that's my opinion. You always go contrary to everything.'

Mr. Dauncey got up and began to fuss over the urn, which was emitting some peculiar sound, and, having taken off the cover and replaced it, sat down again. Belle knew this to be decisive, and did not venture to pursue the subject.

'You may count on me, Miss Dauncey,' whispered Pearce, confidentially, as he handed Belle some cake; but jealous Rover growled. 'It is not every day that an American dies without an heir,' he added gaily, aloud, 'and we must not let possible and probable millions slip through our fingers for fear of spending a few pounds. You have a well-developed bump of caution, Miss Belle.'

‘That is fortunate, for caution is not the family failing,’ replied Belle, meeting an admiring look from the lawyer, and colouring slightly.

She was not given to blushing, and never found time for thinking of lovers, if she had any ; but Mr. Pearce had very bright eyes, and they usually told their own tale, so far as Belle was concerned. They were not so easily read when he was engaged with his clients ; indeed, the clients always said they wished they could understand him, and that he would look them in the face.

Mr. Dauncey rose suddenly and left the room. Belle took advantage of an absence, meant to give Pearce the chance of advancing his suit, to propound her own opinions. She always strove to take the initiative when alone with him, because she dreaded the proposal for which her father longed. But the cautious law-

yer knew what he was about too well to hasten matters.

‘Everyone conspires to hurry Charlie abroad,’ she began. ‘But what are we to do while he is away? You know our affairs, Mr. Pearce, and that we have never any ready money. Miss Dulcey has paid Charlie’s passage; but the children are to come here, which means that here they must stay until Charlie finds something to do, or establishes a claim to this fortune. Nothing comes in from the Brookmead houses, because the rents are wanted for repairs, or interest on mortgages.’

Belle looked inquiringly at Mr. Pearce, who averted his eyes, for was he not the mortgagee?

‘My dear Miss Dauncey, all will be cleared in time if only you will have patience,’ he said, balancing a spoon on the edge of his teacup, as if he were considering which side it would fall. ‘Your father tells

me the farm is in a very promising condition ; that the hay crop is unusually full, and that there never was such a year for apples.'

Belle laughed heartily.

' If I have the bump of caution, father has the bump of hope. I wonder what your predominant bump is, Mr. Pearce ?'

' Veneration, Miss Belle.'

She laughed more heartily still, and he joined, though he knew the joke was against himself.

' What does veneration mean exactly in phrenology ?' she asked.

' Admiration of all that is good, holy, and deserving reverence. I have no doubt it accounts for our mutual regard.'

' I am afraid I do not reverence you, Mr. Pearce. But then Miss Dulcey says I have no veneration.'

Mr. Dauncey returned as suddenly as he had left, and inquired what they were

laughing at. He knew enough of the 'eternal passion' to be assured that a proposal would not be made, rejected, or accepted amid such hilarity.

Belle recounted the conversation, and her father was rather offended than pleased at being accounted so hopeful.

'Please, sir, Mr. Abel is telling me to say your carriage is awaiting,' here broke in Molly, presenting herself to Mr. Pearce, and curtsying, or, more properly, bobbing.

He rose, and, taking a notebook from his pocket, dotted down, in true business fashion, what he had promised to do for Mr. Dauncey.

'Get up signatures. Write Sheeters and Co., New York. Ditto Stint and Co., Montreal. Letters of introduction for Mr. Dauncey. Affidavits.' Here he paused, and addressed Mr. Dauncey. 'You must come to town to-morrow, and I will go with you to Squire Weatherley. He will

take your affidavit, and you must get Miss Dulcey's who knew Jabez Dauncey.'

'Ha, ha!' shouted Dauncey. 'A good joke to show Weatherley what a windfall we are to have. I wish poor Amy had lived to enjoy it; but her children will. We can give 'em the best of educations, Belle. We will make the boy a—a——'

'A lawyer. Article him to me,' put in Pearce. 'Come and see my new horse, Miss Dauncey.'

They all went out to the front door, where the most perfect of dog-carts, the sprucest of grooms, and the most restless of horses awaited their master. Very unlike Miss Dulcey's sober turn-out. Molly's 'Mr. Abel' was the groom, for whom her respect and admiration were great, though she did not believe in his polite speeches.

'Ben don't be saying nothing, but he do mean a deal more than Mr. Abel,' she had said to herself that very afternoon; for

Molly, in her way, was a coquette, and not above receiving compliments, or ‘giving as good as she got.’

‘He is beautiful,’ said Belle, stroking the neck of the horse.

The lawyer wondered which were the superior animal—excuse the term—the well-grown, easy-figured, healthful girl, or the fine-limbed, swift-paced horse. Belle responded to his thought.

‘Why is a horse better-looking and more intelligent than most men?’ she asked, while Mr. Pearce took the reins.

She and her father stood to watch them, as Pearce raised his hat, Abel touched his, and the horse bounded off.

‘A pretty turn-out, Belle. A good-looking fellow, fine profession, nice house, splendid position. Why don’t you give him more encouragement?’ said Mr. Dauncey.

‘He doesn’t want it, father. He isn’t shy,’ she replied.

He was neither shy nor dilatory. Before the week was out the affidavits and all necessary papers were forwarded to Charlie, who had nothing more to do than make the final preparations for his voyage; at least, so it seemed to his father and sister in the country. But Charlie was not quite so expeditious or rapid in his movements as was Mr. Pearce.

Meanwhile, Belle had enough to do to make such preparations as she could for the reception of the children, to see to the farm indoors and out, to manage her father, and to keep Molly in good humour. Molly saw everything, and was constantly losing her patience for Belle’s sake.

‘Why for you work till you drop, and no good, Miss Belle?’ she would say. ‘I think the mens were made to give the

womens work. If ever I am marrying, my man shall keep me.'

'Ben is very industrious; but he will expect you to do your part,' said Belle, significantly.

'Ben is just so much fullish as the rest of the mens, only he do know how to hold his tongue. But I can match him there,' responded Molly, with a laugh. 'That's more than Miss Dulcey can do, for she do talk plenty.'

Miss Dulcey had been away from home since Charlie's visit, but came to hear the news on her return. She encountered Mr. Dauncey, who gave his version of events. She told him that Mr. Pearce had written to her, and that she had given a circumstantial account of her knowledge of Jabez Dauncey, and had spoken to her brother, Squire Weatherley, on the subject.

'The squire was not on the Bench when

I went with Pearce to make my affidavit,' said Mr. Dauncey. 'I made it before young Prendergast, who asked me if I knew anything of his mother. He hadn't heard from her for ages, he said ; and, now I think of it, we haven't heard from Flo for some time. But she is never good at letter-writing.'

'Carried away by the last sensation. That's Flo, Mr. Dauncey. She has the travelling mania and the education mania—not that she's too well educated—and the sensationalism mania, and——'

Miss Dulcey was interrupted by the entrance of Belle, with a letter in her hand. It was from the Flo of whom they were talking. Belle looked radiant, for there was a prospect of her sister's return to England. As soon as she had greeted Miss Dulcey, she read the letter aloud. It contained much that was descriptive of the scene and society of the foreign town

in which she and Mrs. Prendergast had been located, and then went on to say that they were going to travel about for a few weeks previously to their return to England. Flo's sketches of people were incisive and animated, and it was evident that she was herself an object of admiration. Not that she said so ; but wherever she went, the same individuals appeared to follow her, and she criticised them unmercifully.

'I wonder whether Flo will ever have common sense,' said Miss Dulcey. 'She really has all the other gifts, but Nature deprived her of this most valuable boon, to lavish a double portion upon Belle.'

Flo was Mr. Dauncey's darling, and he at once took up her defence. She was quite sensible enough for a woman, and good-looking enough to please the other sex, to say nothing of her manners, which were so attractive that they were irresistible.

‘I can’t deny that she is charming,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘But one wants something more than charms in this workaday world. I hear people drawl out, “Oh, he or she is charming. Quite charming,” which means something and nothing. However, we won’t quarrel over Flo, Mr. Dauncey. I only hope she may pick up a good husband.’

Here Belle laughed, and said that was Flo’s difficulty, for she was never two days in the same mind.

‘And yet she isn’t exactly a flirt,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘She is apparently too unconscious for that abomination. She is rather less unfair to the Americans than most tourists, and I like her for that. I hate to hear people come back to this *multum in parvo* of an island, and abuse a continent they know nothing about. It is so easy to drawl and speak through your nose, and fancy you are imitating a whole people.

It is nothing but jealousy of their dollars and diamonds.'

'Just so, Miss Dulcey,' replied Mr. Dauncey, approvingly. 'If I get the fortune, I shall speak up for the Americans.'

'Man like. Hold fast to your benefactors. I hear our benefactor, Mr. Burmester, is expected home soon, and all the old women will ring the bells. He will preach you a sermon against coveting your neighbour's goods; but I suppose we can scarcely call America a neighbour. I wonder how the vicar will get over that?'

Miss Dulcey laughed, and said she had more to do than ever, for she was left curate in charge, and, if the vicar did not return soon, she would be as poor as he, only she had no family to impoverish.

She beckoned Belle to follow her, when she took leave, and Belle, as usual, walked with her up the hill. Miss Dulcey had received a letter from Mrs. Prendergast,

which she wished to show Belle apart from her father. It concerned Flo, and was not altogether satisfactory.

‘I shall be glad to get home again, for many reasons,’ wrote Mrs. Prendergast. ‘One of them is, that I find Miss Flora Dauncey a responsible companion, and shall like to feel that she is with her natural guardians. She is too attractive. I have not a word to say against her; she has been attentive and agreeable beyond one’s best hopes, but she would be a gorgon and not a girl if she could withstand the admiration she causes. And I know she has had more than one proposal since she has been with me, but has refused, I imagine, decidedly. We travelled with a very agreeable young man, who helped us through what might have been a serious railway accident, and he hovers about at a distance. We do not even know his name, but he watches us persistently, bows and

speaks when we meet, and is inclined to be friendly. I am not strait-laced, as you know, still, I cannot encourage him, seeing that my *protégée*, with her unconscious manners and really unaffected grace, might lead him to believe that she favoured him. So I keep him at a respectful distance. We are going on to Florence to-morrow, and shall doubtless lose sight of him. I tell you this, my dear Miss Dulcey, because you know the girl well, and will not misunderstand me if we part company on my return.'

When Belle had read the letter, or the portion of it which concerned Flo, she and Miss Dulcey stood for a few moments to discuss it. Belle was inclined to be indignant, but there was nothing unkind in Mrs. Prendergast's letter, so she merely sighed as she said :

'Flo must come home, and be miserable again.'

‘Why miserable?’ asked Miss Dulcey.

‘I don’t know; but she wants excitement, and there is none here. There isn’t even the ghost of an admirer, and our penny readings are dull and slow. I wish she had never gone to stay with poor Amy.’

‘I am responsible for that,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘I took her about everywhere, and was as proud of her as if she had been my daughter. We must make the best of her, and be thankful that she is, as Mrs. Prendergast says, “unconscious.” At least, I suppose she is. She seems so. Don’t make yourself miserable, Belle. If we are the “next-of-kin,” who knows but she may marry a prince. Then even you would be satisfied!’

Miss Dulcey hurried up the hill to the Gables, and Belle back to her household duties with troubled mind. She knew her sister well, and dreaded her return home, because the moment she set foot on the

farm she grew discontented. However, she had no time to lose in useless fears while so many certainties pressed upon her. Charlie would start almost immediately for America, the children would be with her soon after, and then she would have an amount of responsibility thrust upon her that she knew not how she would support. While everybody else looked forward to the huge fortune in prospect, she could not believe that it would ever be theirs.

CHAPTER VI.

MAMY.

WHEN Belle went next to Orchardson Station, she walked, and greatly enjoyed her walk, for she loved to be alone sometimes. Her movements were as brisk and energetic as her mind, and a stranger would have said of her, 'There is a young woman who has plenty to do.' A friend would have added, 'Yes, and she knows how to do it.' This is the secret of success. Everybody has, or ought to have, work enough, but everybody cannot get through it. Belle knew that she must be at the

station by half-past six, so she lost no time by the way. She did not even tarry to talk to the poor folk, who loved to gossip with her, or to gather a spray of wild roses ; she had to walk, and she walked.

She need not have been quite so rapid, for it was only twenty-three minutes past six when she reached the station. However, she had time to see that the one fly which she had chartered was ready, and to have a few words with her friend, the station-master. He was evidently looking for her, and she felt that it was pleasant to be expected. He told her that he had not had a minute to spare since the day on which she accompanied Charlie to the station, or he would certainly have paid his promised visit to Castle Farm. She told him in return that her brother had left England for America, and that she had come to meet his children, who were to be brought to Orchardson by an old

nurse. While this was passing, the train steamed up.

‘Which class?’ asked Mulready.

‘Third,’ replied Belle, and they both hurried to the rear of the train.

Just as they reached it a respectable woman and three children got out.

‘You are Fanny, and these are the children?’ said Belle; but her words were unheeded.

The three children were clinging to their nurse, who took the youngest up in her arms, and held her to her breast as if in great grief. Meanwhile a quantity of luggage was thrown out, and the steam-whistle sounded. Mr. Mulready bade the nurse beware of the train, thinking she was to remain behind, but Belle told him hastily that she was going on to a new situation.

‘Give me the child and jump in,’ he said, receiving into his arms a little

struggling stranger, who clung to her nurse and sobbed that she would go with Fanny.

The nurse kissed the other children and got into the carriage. Belle hastened to shake hands with her, and to assure her that they should be well cared for, and that she should come and see them whenever she liked.

‘I know, miss, I know. But they are just like my own,’ returned the good woman, with a last glance at the youngest, still in Mr. Mulready’s arms.

‘I do with Fanny,’ she screamed, as the train steamed off, and left the three motherless children with the aunt whom they had never seen before.

‘If you please I can take care of Mamy,’ said one of them, addressing Mulready.

‘And I can see after the luggage,’ exclaimed another.

Mulready transferred his burden to

Belle's arms, who sat down on one of the boxes and strove to comfort her.

'I am Aunt Belle, darling,' she said, laying the little head on her shoulder.

'And pappy said we should love Aunt Belle dearly,' whispered another child to the troubled one.

'And yet you have none of you kissed or spoken to Aunt Belle,' cried this formidable relative, who began to realise her weight of added care.

But she was soon eased of a portion of it by her nephew, a boy of about twelve, who came to her with all the assurance of a man.

'How do you do, Aunt Belle? The luggage is all right. I have counted the packages. Father won't be gone long, he says; and we are to make the most of our holiday. You mustn't mind Mamy; she's awfully silly, you know. Cheer up, Mamy, and look at the puff-puff!'

Belle had not much experience of the boy of the period, and looked at her nephew with surprise. Mr. Mulready was standing near and laughed.

The third child, a girl of ten, put her arm round Belle's neck and kissed her. This roused the little one, who glanced up timidly.

'Me want Fanny,' she said. 'Mamy want Fanny.'

'This box, miss, please. All the others is in,' here interrupted Belle's friend, the station-porter.

She got up and gave Mamy into her sister's charge, while she looked after the luggage. Mr. Mulready took the little girls into his cosy parlour, where Belle and her very efficient nephew found them. But not even a fine cat, the flowers, or a sponge cake could console Mamy. Her little breast still heaved with sobs. Mulready carried her to the fly, while Belle led

Marjory, the other girl, through the flowers.

‘Is this a florist’s place? Is that man a florist, Aunt Belle?’ asked Marjory.

‘No; he is Mr. Mulready, the station-master.’

‘He has got a jolly lot of flowers,’ exclaimed the nephew, who had been called Weatherley after a maternal grandfather who took no heed of him. ‘Mamy, look at the flowers,’ he added, with a shout that made the child uplift her head.

Belle and Marjory were soon in the fly, and Mr. Mulready essayed to place his little charge on Belle’s lap, but she clung to him.

‘She thinks it’s father; she likes gentlemen best,’ said Marjory. ‘Make haste, Mamy, or we shan’t see the cows and pigs, and peacock,’ she added, almost snatching her from Mulready’s arms.

‘Peatot! bigtail!’ lisped Mamy, looking

about her for the first time, and showing the sweetest of baby faces.

‘Where’s my cane? Marjy, what did you do with it?’ asked Master Weatherley.

‘Here it is, sir,’ said the porter. ‘I picked it up on the platform, and thought it was somebody else’s.’

‘Thanks, porter. Now, Marjy, will you take care of it while I get upon the box. I suppose I may, Aunt Belle?’ said Weatherley.

Belle and Mulready exchanged smiles.

‘Shall I help you up?’ asked the latter.

‘No, thanks. I’m used to mounting omnibuses. But now the ’buses have stairs, and a fellow has no trouble,’ replied Weatherley, climbing to the box-seat with the ease of a Londoner: for, say what one will of country folk, they are less agile than your City clerk, or even than his chief.

At last they drove off, and Belle wondered what she had better do with Mamy. Having much experience of the village children generally, she decided to take no notice of her. Marjory was holding her by the frock, while she stood irresolute in the fly. Suddenly she put her thumb in her mouth.

‘It’s all right now, Aunt Belle,’ whispered Marjory. ‘She’s always good when she sucks her thumb, and then Fanny nurses her till she goes to sleep.’

Belle took the hint and lifted the now unresisting child to her lap. She removed the huge granny-bonnet which disfigured her, laid her tender head, with its pretty, fair curls, on her breast, wiped the tears from the closing eyes, and held the little hand. But Marjory loosed the hand and raised it to Belle’s ear, which the child fondled awhile, until the grasp relaxed, and Mamy was asleep.

‘She always does that,’ said Marjory. ‘Now, Aunt Belle, may I stand up and look out of the window?’

‘Certainly,’ returned Belle, who was glad that her nephew and niece were obedient if independent.

‘Take care of my cane, Marjy,’ shouted the young man on the box, who had been engaged already in an animated conversation with the driver. ‘If you lose it, I’ll pay you off.’

‘Please to hold it for me, Aunt Belle, for fear I should drop it,’ said Marjory, putting the cane into Belle’s hand.

‘What does he want with it?’ asked Belle.

‘Oh, to walk with. All the boys carry canes,’ replied Marjory, importantly.

She was not shy, and was soon questioning Belle on the objects they passed, and answering questions in return. She was a bright child with an animated face and

manner ; had dark eyes and chestnut hair, which was of great length—and hung loosely down her back—and a very voluble tongue. She talked of exams. as if she were a Cambridge professor, and declared her intention of passing them all, and being eventually certificated.

‘Because you know, Aunt Belle, father isn’t rich, and we must work for our bread, unless he gets this great fortune,’ she added.

It may be as well to say here that Charles Dauncey had done his best to educate his children. He had sent the two eldest to high schools, as the readiest and cheapest means of acquiring the somewhat stilted and one-sided learning required to pass certain examinations, more likely to result in brain fever than spiritual advancement. They had done well so far, and Weatherley had gained prizes for answering questions that his father declared he

could not have answered: and so that masterful youth considered himself a genius. In this opinion he was fostered by his poor mother, who believed that he would eventually be Prime Minister, at least. Marjory was also studying subjects of which Aunt Belle knew nothing, and it was a relief to hear that she was very fond of music. She was, in short, 'going in for music,' she said. As to sweet little three-year-old Mamy, she was as yet uninstructed, the only letter she knew being M, which, for some inscrutable reason, she had added to her christian name of Amy, and which had served to distinguish her from the mother, whose name was ever on her father's lips. That mother had been dead about eighteen months, since which period the children had been mainly indebted to Fanny for care and management. Their father could not say them nay when their mother left them, and no one dared uplift

a finger of reproach to Mamy, who resembled that departed wife most nearly.

Belle would gladly have asked Fanny to remain with the children if she could have afforded it. As it was, however, she thought it best to let her accept a good situation in a neighbouring parish. She had originally gone to her sister-in-law from Hollyfield.

All the inmates of the farm were on the look-out for the fly. One man held the gate open, another was standing, spade in hand, hard by, watching for 'Measter Charlie's children,' while Mr. Dauncey and Molly occupied the porch.

'Marjory, there's the peacock!' shouted Weatherley from the box.

'Mamy, there's the peacock!' echoed Marjory; and that magnificent bird swept his gorgeous tail across the paddock.

Mamy woke up, and Belle turned her head towards the window.

‘Peatot!’ she echoed in turn ; and Belle was mortified to find that ‘fine feathers’ were more attractive than natural relationship.

However, when the fly pulled up, Master Weatherley was off the box in no time, and greeting his grandfather as if he had known him all his life. Mr. Dauncey had been meditating on what words he could use to make the children feel at home. Molly, too, was quite overpowered by the boy’s condescension, for his father had told him to be ‘sure and shake hands with Molly,’ a command he obeyed with all his heart. When Marjory was out of the fly, she imitated her brother in everything, and a more sociable and enthusiastic couple of children could scarcely have been deposited in, to them, an unknown land.

But Mamy clung to Belle, and hid her pretty face on her shoulder. She would not even look at her grandfather, and

began to cry when Belle tried to put her down. Mr. Weatherley shrugged his shoulders, and inwardly exclaimed,

‘We have done for ourselves now,’ while Molly muttered,

‘There’s spoilt she is.’

‘No, she isn’t; only she’s frightened at first,’ said Marjory, who chanced to overhear.

But the fly was cleared, the driver paid, and the children housed in a few minutes, while Weatherley and Marjory had a slight dispute over the cane, much to Mr. Dauncey’s edification. That wand was found at the bottom of the fly, and Belle said she had dropped it.

‘It doesn’t matter, Aunt Belle, only Marjory is so awfully careless,’ said Weatherley.

Belle took the little girls upstairs, while he remained with his grandfather. He

poured out such messages as his father had sent; then asked, in a confidential sort of way whether they were really next-of-kin to the American millionaire. This put his grandfather at his ease, for, absurd as it may seem, he had been almost silenced by his loquacious grandson.

‘Sit down, my lad, and I will tell you,’ he said; and, when Belle returned with the other children, she found her father descending earnestly on the history of Jabez Dauncey, and Weatherley listening attentively.

The old man and the boy were nose and knees together, and Belle laughed at the sight. The little girls came hand in hand, and, as if by intuition, Marjory led Mamy up to her grandfather. The child stood a minute with her sweet little head on one side, and her mouth pursed up as if for a cry, looking at him. Mr. Dauncey held

out his hand, and made a sort of chirrup. The child ran towards him, and he lifted her on his knee.

‘Dada, dada,’ she cried, struggling to free herself, for she was looking for her father.

Weatherly and Marjory put their arms round her, whispering that dada was coming, and the embarrassed grandfather was about to rise, when another candidate for his affection leaped upon him. This was Rover, jealous of the children.

‘Dog, dog, do away, dog,’ lisped Mamy; and Belle called him off.

The diversion paved the way for further acquaintance, and Mr. Dauncey took the child in his arms, carried her to the tea-table and gave her to Belle, who placed her on a high chair at her side.

‘Please, may Mamy say grace?’ asked Marjory. ‘She always says it at home. Say grace, Mamy.’

At this order the child shut her eyes, clasped her hands, and murmured :

‘Dod bless us ;’ which Marjory supplemented by, ‘and our food, and us to Thy service, for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.’

‘Of course she can’t say it all, but father liked her to begin,’ explained the astute Marjory.

‘I’m awfully hungry,’ said Weatherley.

‘Like father, like son,’ laughed Dauncey ; and the meal went merrily on.

They were all too well engaged for talk, and even Mamy roused up for the fresh milk and other dainties.

‘She always feeds herself,’ explained Marjory, when Belle hesitated as to her duties ; and it was pretty to see the chubby hands grasp the cup, and convey it safely to the cherry lips.

Before the children had quite finished, Miss Dulcey arrived. They had seen her

from time to time in London, so there was no need of introduction.

‘Don’t move, children ; I hate fuss,’ she said, tripping round the table from one to another, and saluting them. ‘I feel ashamed to call such a big fellow as Weatherley a great-nephew. Are you as conceited as ever? He is the cleverest boy in London, Mr. Dauncey, in his own estimation.’

‘He passed his last exam. with honours, Aunt Dulcey,’ said Marjory, proudly. ‘And I got the music prize, and I am going in for music.’

‘They speak a new language,’ said puzzled Mr. Dauncey.

Miss Dulcey laughed, and said that there was no time for long words in the nineteenth century. ‘Examination’ was quite out of date, like ‘photograph,’ and other monstrosities.

‘Exam. and photo. are timely abbreviations. I mean they don’t take up time, Mr. Dauncey.’

‘Is that why Marjory’s frock is abbreviated, Miss Dulcey? Does it save the dressmaker’s time?’

‘Nurse says I am growing out of my dresses,’ here put in Marjory, hanging her head and colouring. ‘Father couldn’t afford to buy new ones.’

‘Anyhow, they haven’t abbreviated your legs, child. But never mind. You shall have plenty of new frocks when we get our fortune,’ said Mr. Dauncey.

‘Mamy is falling asleep. It is long past her bedtime,’ said Marjory, indifferent, apparently, to her grandfather’s promise. ‘May I put her to bed, Aunt Belle?’

‘We will both go, dear,’ replied Belle, uplifting the child, and leaving the room, followed by Marjory and Miss Dulcey.

Belle had prepared a small room, communicating with her own, for her nieces; Weatherley was to occupy his father's. How lovingly she had worked to arrange the white dimity curtains, the muslin blinds, and the dainty table-cover; and how fresh and sweet was the breeze that flowed in through the open window. Miss Dulcey was as much delighted as Marjory, and whispered to the little girl;

‘Aunt Belle does all things well. Follow her example.’

‘What a pretty rhyme you have made,’ cried Marjory. “‘Aunt Belle does all things well.’ I shall tell it to Weatherley. We write poetry, and he means to be an author.’

Miss Dulcey little thought that her unpremeditated rhyme was to become a proverb in the house. She watched Belle and Marjory undress Mamy, and thought of the mother in heaven with a sympathetic

tear in her eye; she saw them lay the fair head on the pillow, and reproached herself that she had helped to bring about that mother's marriage; but when the little one suddenly awoke with the words, 'Mamy tay payers,' on her lips, she fell on her knees by the side of the white bed, and sobbed. 'She has a tender heart, has Miss Dulcey,' said the villagers; and so she had.

Marjory climbed on the bed, and raised the little sister. With her protecting arm supporting her, both being on their knees, she folded the tiny hands.

'Now, darling: "God bless——"' she whispered; and Mamy lisped forth, 'Dod bless dada and mamma, and bother and sister, and Fanny and——' She was asleep again, and Marjory laid her head back on the pillow and drew the clothes about her.

Belle clasped Marjory in her arms, and

silently asked her Father in heaven to aid her in doing her duty by these dear children.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VICAR.

‘WE certainly ought to hear to-day, Belle ; Charlie must have reached Montreal a fortnight ago, and should have written at once, even if he had nothing definite to tell,’ said Mr. Dauncey, a few weeks after the arrival of his grandchildren.

‘Perhaps there will be a letter to-day. Weatherley is on the look-out for the post-man,’ returned Belle.

‘That boy knows everything. I used to think Charlie clever, but he beats him hollow ; he’s like old Weatherley.

Where's Marjory? I've heard a deal of the high schools, and the education of women, and female suffrage, and women's colleges, but never believed in it at all till I saw her. She's a woman before her time.'

'She is in the parlour, practising. She complains of Flo's old piano, and says she can't get any tone out of it. She has joined a practising union, she tells me, and is bound to practise an hour a day.'

Bella said this with a puzzled smile, for she found it difficult to accommodate herself to the 'advanced culture' of the day. However, in spite of her education and the 'jargon of the schools,' Marjory was quite capable of taking care of herself, and running wild at the farm.

A little cooing sound reached Mr. Dauncey as he paced the room, according to his custom, while speaking to Belle. He had just come in to let off a little of his restless anxiety on her much-enduring person.

Turning, he perceived Mamy, seated in a corner, rocking herself and a new doll on a low chair that had been Belle's when a child, and singing softly. Mr. Dauncey prided himself on his own vocal powers, and on having 'come of a musical family,' as he expressed it.

'Hush, Belle! Don't make such a clatter with that sewing machine. What a voice the child has! Fine as Flo's; and that's saying a good deal. Mamy, come and sing to grandfather.'

Mamy was rather afraid of Mr. Dauncey, and ran to Belle instead. She was already more than accustomed to her, and trotted about after her like a miniature shadow. Two or three weeks suffice to make a child happy or miserable, and Mamy was perfectly happy and at home. Rover had become her devoted slave; she fed the poultry with Aunt Belle, and even ran after the 'peatot' and Miss Dulcey's enemy, the

turkey-cock. As to the other children, they might have been born and bred in the country, they enjoyed it so thoroughly.

Belle took Mamy on her lap, and coaxed her to sing 'Little Bo-Peep' to grandfather.

'Mamy sing, danfa,' repeated the child, fixing her eyes on Mr. Dauncey.

He perceived their earnest beauty for the first time. She resembled one of Sir Joshua Reynolds's cherubs, and he said she was like an angel.

'Ittle Bo-Peep,' she began, suddenly, still keeping her blue eyes riveted on her grandfather.

She had, indeed, a sweet voice, and sang the nursery rhyme with the usual childish uncertainty, looking to Aunt Belle for prompting. Emboldened by success, she went off into other tunes, caught, apparently, from street organs, and showed by

their truth and harmony that she was gifted with ear and voice.

‘I wish old Weatherley could hear her,’ ejaculated Mr. Dauncey. ‘What has become of that loitering fellow, Daniels?’

Daniels was the postman.

This question was answered by a shout in the passage, and the sudden opening of a door.

‘Marjory, Marjory! come here. Stop that rattle of keys. Here’s a letter from father.’

In burst Weatherley, followed by Marjory, both in breathless excitement.

‘It is for you, grandfather. It comes from Montreal,’ cried the boy. ‘May I open it? I’ve got an envelope knife. Here are your spectacles.’

‘Please make haste, grandfather,’ said Marjory, all of a tremble, while Belle, as much excited as the children, put Mamy

off her lap, and stood behind her father's chair.

Weatherley had split open the top of the envelope, while Marjory bade him be careful of the stamp, and Mr. Dauncey mounted his spectacles.

'We've got a stamp-book, Aunt Belle,' explained Marjory, taking possession of the envelope, and impressing a kiss on the address. 'It's father's very own writing, Mamy darling. Kiss father,' she added, putting the direction to Mamy's lips.

The little one's tiny hand was on her grandfather's knee, Weatherley's and Belle's on either shoulder, and Marjory stood in front. The background of the picture was a deep-set window with a low seat, covered with a bright chintz cushion.

'My love and kisses to the darling children, and I hope they are good, and give no trouble,' the letter began.

'So like Charlie! He begins where

others end,' said Mr. Dauncey, with a choke in his voice. Then he proceeded to read the remainder, which, being somewhat diffuse and descriptive, we must curtail in parts.

Charlie's voyage had been altogether prosperous, and he had reached Montreal safely. Arrived there, he was not long in finding out Messrs. Stint and Co., and we will give his interview with them in his own words.

'They were very civil and polite,' he wrote, 'but scarcely as communicative as I expected. They said a colony of Daunceys had already turned up, either in person or by letter, both in America and England. As it was not a common name, they were surprised at the extent of our connections, and so was I, for certainly we have no relations of that name. However, I showed them all the certificates and affidavits, and I think they quite believed in

me, though they said innumerable cousins had sent in a claim for the fortune, besides one brother, and a nephew or two. But what startled and surprised me most was that Jabez Dauncey had once had a son, and that it was uncertain whether he were alive or dead !

‘A son !’ here interjected Mr. Dauncey, in blank amazement. ‘Then we have had all our trouble in vain.’

‘He is sure to be dead, grandfather,’ said Weatherley. ‘Please go on.’

Mr. Dauncey continued to read.

‘I asked why they had not advertised for the son directly, and they replied that as he was next-of-kin one advertisement sufficed. Jabez Dauncey had been a violent, irascible man, and some years ago had quarrelled with this son, because he disliked the business by which his father had made his wealth, and wanted to enter one of the learned professions. No one

knew what had become of the young man, or whether his father had knowledge of him, but he had not been seen in Montreal since Jabez told him that he might go about his business, if he didn't find his father's good enough for him. The son had not had a pleasant life, so he accepted his dismissal, but it was reported that he had frequently written to his father during his first year of absence, though no letters were known to arrive during the last. Therefore, it was confidently reported that he was dead. It certainly looks like it, since he must otherwise have seen the advertisement, which Mr. Stint told me had been circulated in all the American and most of the English papers.

‘Jabez Dauncey died suddenly of an attack of apoplexy, and left no will, therefore his enormous wealth—and it is greater than we fancied—is, so to say, going begging. It will be no joke to substantiate

our claim to it, since there are so many other claimants, but the lawyers see clearly enough that we are no impostors ; but that does not settle the “ next-of-kin,” if the imaginary “ brother ” or “ nephews ” can forge a nearer relationship. They, the solicitors, seem very straightforward, and I like the Americans. They are kind and hospitable, and it is my fault, I suppose, if I cannot “ go their pace.” I am tolerably well—better than when I left England—but I seem lost without the children.’

‘ Good father—dear pappy—dada,’ came from the said children involuntarily, and Belle wiped her eyes.

‘ It is a pity we ever bothered ourselves about it,’ she exclaimed, brusquely. ‘ And the sooner we give it up the better.’

‘ I shall never give in while I have a chance,’ returned Dauncey, and read on.

‘ I cannot say how long I may be obliged to remain here, and already begin to won-

der how the funds will hold out. Messrs. Stint require a copy of Jabez Dauncey's baptismal entry—I mean a certificate of his baptism; and, if I remember aright, you are not certain where he was baptised. I have put them in communication with Pearce concerning certain other legal matters which I don't understand, and will write again as soon as they have made out a list of inquiries they want answered. If no son should turn up, I think we shall have a good chance, but the law is so procrastinating that I know not when it will be decided. They want a pedigree of Jabez which I doubt if he ever had, and especially the collateral history of his father and yours. The lawyers say that it is curious how many people have come to America, have amassed fortunes, and died intestate, and that the difficulty of tracing their origin, and sifting the claims of real or supposed relatives, is sometimes insurmountable. I

wish you were here, as your evidence would be far more valuable than mine.'

'What will he wish next?' groaned Belle, who knew that her father only wanted a proper excuse to follow his son.

'Then we haven't got the big fortune yet,' said Weatherley, reflectively. 'Father promised that I should study for the army if we got it, but I mean to take the first thing that offers, since it doesn't so much matter what a fellow does as what he is.'

'Bravo! I am proud to make the acquaintance of the enunciator of that sentiment!' were words that broke in upon the little conclave, and caused Belle to flush with delight, and her father to rise suddenly with an exclamation of pleasure.

They both gave a hearty welcome to a pale, somewhat gaunt, and delicate-looking man, who entered unannounced. Indeed, Molly was in no condition to announce

visitors, and Belle had not heard his knock at the door. It was Mr. Burmester, vicar of Hollyfield. He had been taking his holiday, with his wife and daughter, on the Continent, and had returned the previous day. His wife was a great invalid, and he was not strong himself, so they had gone abroad in search of health. They were both better, he said, and he had come to see Charlie's children, and to enquire of the state of his parish of Belle, who was everybody's aid and referee. She speedily gave him the information he required, and introduced him to the children. Mamy was in his arms in a trice, and called him 'Dada,' to the scandal of the other children, who believed in no father but their own.

'Are you the young man who uttered the sentiment I heard as I came in?' asked Mr. Burmester, as he shook hands with Weatherley.

'Yes; because, if one is poor, one must

work,' replied the boy, looking the vicar in the face.

'Then I shall employ you directly,' said the latter. 'He can take that class in the Sunday-school which has never been well managed since young Marshall left us. What do you say, Belle?'

'What does he say?' laughed Belle.

'Teaching doesn't pay nowadays, but I shall be happy to be of use,' said Weatherley, importantly.

'He's years older than his grandfather,' said Dauncey. 'But we've just had a letter from Charlie.'

Mr. Burmester looked grave at once. He had heard of the 'next-of-kin,' and, being a man of the world, knew that it was as hard to claim an American fortune as a copyright. He read the letter and merely asked—

'What does Belle say?'

'That we can't afford to waste our

money. But the ball is set rolling, and nobody knows where it will stop,' replied Belle.

They all discussed the matter, Weatherley offering an opinion occasionally, and Mr. Burmester thought it a good opportunity to preach a little sermon to Mr. Dauncey, whose love for speculation was patent to all his friends.

'What would you do with so much money if you got it? Money is such a snare. But worst of all would be having recourse to law, and I fear that between Stint and Co., in Canada, and Pearce and Co.,—but Pearce has no Co.,—in England, we should all be ruined. Holy scripture is very sound upon this point, as upon all others, and I, for one, would rather follow its precepts than the world's.'

Mr. Dauncey had a high opinion of his vicar, not only because he was a right-minded and conscientious minister of the

gospel, but because he practised what he preached. He knew that he had more than once lost money because he would not go to law, and that the remonstrances of his more worldly friends had been thrown away upon him. However, Mr. Dauncey held his own.

‘The fact is, vicar,’ he said, ‘if anyone has a right to Jabez Dauncey’s money it is my father’s son, your humble servant. Jabez led us all a pretty life. He was a bad-tempered fellow, and always taking offence. My father treated him just as he did me, and if he got more birchings than I did, it was because he deserved them. He ran away more than once, and when he returned was always kindly received. As to my poor mother, she lavished love upon him, and I don’t think he cared a button for any of us. He hadn’t a halfpenny of his own, and when he took his final departure he carried off—well, I won’t say what,

but he wasn't honest, and that's the long and the short of it. He never wrote to us or expressed any gratitude, and I don't wonder at his son's leaving him. It served him right.'

'Perhaps he was young, and knew no better,' said Mr. Burmester, glancing at Weatherley, who was listening acutely.

'He was in his sixteenth year, and must have been fifty-eight when he died. He was sharp and clever, and would have got on anywhere. My father was about to get him a clerkship, which he disliked, and they had some words over it. He said he wouldn't be tied to a desk, and my father told him that, if that was the case, he must get a position for himself. He took him at his word, and absconded. Now, vicar, as I am the next-of-kin, don't you think I have a right to his property?'

'I suppose so, if the son doesn't turn up,' said Mr. Burmester. 'At any rate,

you have laid claim to it, and must await the result. All that Belle and I wish to urge is that you shall not ruin yourself, as so many have done, in the pursuit.'

'I would certainly go to Montreal after it, if I could,' said Dauncey, irritably, for he hated good advice, as most people do.

'Will you bring these children to the vicarage to tea, this afternoon, Belle?' asked Mr. Burmester. 'My wife and Dolly want to see them. Then we can settle about the class and other odds and ends.'

Belle assented, to the great joy of Marjory, and the vicar went away, followed by Mr. Dauncey, who walked with him up the hill as far as the school-house, situated below the Gables. Dauncey took up the thread of the previous conversation nearly where he had dropped it previously.

'You see, vicar, that the times are bad, and even a slice of this money would be a blessing to us. I don't mind telling you

what I wouldn't breathe to anyone else—that I am in difficulties. I can't get my rents, and farming, as you know, doesn't pay. I can't settle my mortgages, and now Charlie and the children are an additional burden. I mean that his position as a medical man is precarious, and that he will have to look out for a fresh practice when he comes back, unless Dr. Silver makes him his partner. Not that I have the least fear as regards Jabez Dauncey's money. It must be ours, and we shall be freed from all anxieties when that point is settled. Between ourselves, I was foolish not to go myself, as I could have arranged the matter at once.'

The vicar knew this, his parishioner, well, and did not venture to offer further advice. He merely said that he earnestly hoped he would not be disappointed, and added that there was a Power who could manage the most complicated affairs, and who would

bring order out of confusion, if entire trust were placed in Him.

‘Oh! I know that well enough,’ said Dauncey, who was one of your fair-weather believers, and trusted in Almighty guidance while his affairs were smooth. ‘But one must work oneself, and not let life’s chances slip, as I’ve done heretofore.’

‘Quite so,’ said the vicar, opening the schoolroom door, through which issued the hum of many voices.

Dauncey stood to watch him as he went in, and marked the glow of pleasure on every young face when he appeared.

‘This is his first visit,’ he thought, as he saw him shake hands with the mistress, and heard his hearty greeting to the children. ‘He’s a good man, and I’m thankful he’s back again; but I hate all interference, and parsons must be preachers both in public and private.’

In short, Mr. Dauncey would go his own

way despite all the preaching in the world ; and that was the sum and substance of his character.

During his brief absence from the farm, his grandson had been holding forth to Belle in a way that greatly astonished her. She had perceived that he was a lad of great self-reliance, and, she whispered to herself, still greater conceit ; but she had quite misread him. He was not conceited, he was simply fearless. He believed that he could master the world, and set about it early. Marjory had returned to her practice, and Mamy had gone with her, so Belle and her nephew were alone for a few minutes.

‘ Aunt Belle,’ he began, ‘ I want to earn my own living ; many fellows do it who are no older than I. Grandfather and father can’t work much while they are after this big fortune, and you aren’t strong enough to do everything ; you can’t keep us all.

'There's Marjory and Mamy not old enough to help, but I am. If I had Jabez Dauncey's chance of a clerkship, I'd take it directly. I'd even begin as office-boy if I could earn something; many fellows do, who are quite gentlemen, because, you see, the world is so full that there isn't a living to be had for all the inhabitants.'

Belle looked at the boy, and saw that he was in earnest. She thought of Pearce's proposal that he should be articed to him, and almost shuddered.

'You can help me in the farm, Weatherley,' she said. 'I want some one whom I can trust to assist me in many ways.'

'Thank you, Aunt Belle; but that wouldn't bring in money. I must earn my own living, and I don't care how. Marjory and I settled that we would make money when we saw poor mother so anxious about it. She is too young yet, but I am quite old enough.'

‘ I will speak to Mr. Burmester about it. But, my dear boy, you came here for a holiday, not for work,’ said Belle.

‘ You never have a holiday, Aunt Belle ; why should I ? Men are stronger than women, though they do say in London that women have the most go in them. I know they get clerkships and seats in omnibuses and all sorts of things before us,’ said Weatherley, grandly.

Belle could not help smiling, though she felt the force of his arguments. They were cut short, however, by the return of her father, who said he wanted to speak to her. Weatherley took the hint, and went off in search of occupation.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SQUIRE.

HOLLYFIELD VICARAGE was comparatively a new house—that is to say, new when compared with its neighbours. Mr. Burmester had inaugurated his taking possession of the living of Hollyfield by a resolution, since well kept, to restore the church and rebuild the vicarage. He was young and vigorous in those early days, had just married, and was full of zeal for the welfare of his parishioners. He was vigorous still, and zealous as ever, but neither he nor his wife was in good health, and we all know that weak digestions are

sad drawbacks to earthly bliss as well as to hard work.

The vicarage was, as it should be, the church's right hand. Only an iron railing divided the sloping and smooth lawn of the one from the tree-shadowed and well-kept graveyard of the other. The church was ancient, and in its restoration the vicar had been careful to preserve intact its square tower and pointed porch. The stone seats and curious woodwork of the porch rejoiced the villagers of the nineteenth century as much as they had those of the sixteenth, and no old monument was allowed to go to decay, either within or without the sacred building.

The vicarage, on the contrary, was modern, and looked smilingly down from its elevated site upon the few houses and the schoolhouse standing within its ken. It slightly overtopped the Gables, and Miss Dulcey was wont to declare that it was

impossible for her to go out or come in without being inspected by curious eyes. The real parish of which Mr. Burmester was pastor was scattered over a couple of miles of fields and lanes, and he had much more work to do than a stranger might have guessed. He would sometimes declare that the flock he shepherded was more wandering and restive than the larger one he had kept when curate in a great manufacturing town, and just as hard to bring into the true fold. He realised the trite saying, that human nature is the same everywhere, and laboured, and preached, and prayed as indefatigably to his rustic population as he had done to his crowded city parish. Moreover, he was just as happy and useful in the one as in the other.

A bright and cheerful spot was Hollyfield Vicarage, and, whenever the sun shone, he was sure to shine right into its windows,

and all over its garden and lawn. Unlike its neighbour, Castle Farm, it had no dark side, but, like the 'city set on a hill,' served as a beacon to all comers. And no guest was unwelcome, either to the vicar, his wife, or daughter; for, although Mrs. Burmester was generally in delicate health, she made it her special 'mission,' in these days of missions, to welcome indiscriminately gentle and simple. Miss Dulcey declared she 'overdid it,' and perhaps there was some truth in this opinion, since countryfolk are great sticklers for etiquette. Be that as it may, she and her daughter Dolly awaited impatiently their visitors from Castle Farm, on the afternoon of the vicar's visit to that quarter of his parish.

They were at work in a pleasant sitting-room which commanded a view not only of the Gables, but of the landscape beyond it. Mrs. Burmester was knitting a woollen petticoat, as she reclined in a sort of chaise

lounge, while Dolly was making believe to embroider an antimacassar intended for Miss Dulcey's birthday. The mother fought such a fight with her invalidism that people were inclined to think there was not much the matter with her; but she was really seldom out of pain. Those who know what chronic suffering means will appreciate her efforts. Dolly, who had scarcely ever felt an ache, was sometimes a little wearied by them; but then Dolly was young, slightly spoilt, and hated being indoors. Besides, her mother was given to 'improving the occasion,' as the saying is, and Dolly fancied she knew what was right and what was wrong, without being continually reminded of it.

Dolly was the roundest, ruddiest, merriest specimen of twelve-year-old girlhood imaginable, and not unlike her mother, who looked much less of an invalid than she was. Indeed, Mrs. Burmester was a riddle

to her friends, simply because she was uncomplaining, and disliked talking of her ailments.

‘There’s Miss Dulcey. I hope she isn’t coming here,’ suddenly exclaimed Dolly, jumping up and looking out of the window.

‘Why do you hope that, Dolly?’ asked her mother, reprovingly. ‘I am sure Miss Dulcey is most kind to you. It is very wrong——’

‘Oh, yes, mother, I know,’ interrupted Dolly. ‘But I wanted to have the children all to myself. I wish they would come. Hurrah! here they are; and Miss Dulcey too, I verily believe. No. She has turned back.’

‘Forgot something, I suppose,’ suggested Mrs. Burmester, glancing from the window on Miss Dulcey, retreating into her house; it was literally true that she could not move without the oversight of her friends.

Dolly ran out of the house and down the

side path leading to the church to meet Belle and the children. They had come by the gravelled walk beneath the castle, and were toiling up the somewhat steep continuation of it towards the vicarage. Dolly raced across the lawn, and was in their midst. She threw her arms round Belle in ecstatic delight, exclaiming,

‘Oh, you dear Belle! I am so glad to be home again. There is no place in the world like Hollyfield.’

Then she collapsed when she saw what a big boy Weatherley was, and grew almost shy. Belle formally introduced them, and they shook hands with all the etiquette of discreet years. Marjory held up her face for a kiss, which restored Dolly’s free manner, and, when she saw Mamy hiding in Aunt Belle’s petticoat, she caught her up in her arms, nearly frightening the child to death.

‘She doesn’t know you,’ said Marjory, holding out protecting arms to Mamy.

‘She soon will,’ cried Dolly, running off with Mammy to her mother, followed by Marjory.

‘What a funny girl!’ ejaculated Weatherley. ‘She is very countrified, Aunt Belle.’

They found Mammy quite happy on Mrs. Burmester’s lap, with Dolly on her knees at her side; indeed, they were soon a merry party. Mrs. Burmester and Belle were fast friends, and had much to say to one another, so Dolly was told to take her new friends into the nursery, as her schoolroom was still called, where they soon made acquaintance, and Weatherley confided to Marjory that she was ‘a very jolly girl.’

Mrs. Burmester had a proposal to make to Belle, and lost no time in making it.

‘I see at a glance that Marjory is just what I have been wanting for Dolly,’ she said. ‘I think when Flo comes back we cannot do better than get her to undertake their education together. I suppose she

must do something; and teaching will steady her, if anything will. Your niece could come here and learn with Dolly, and the even tenor of our ways would not be destroyed by a resident governess or any interloper. Flo and Marjory could spend the best part of the day at the vicarage, and return to you when lessons are over.'

Belle was surprised by this sudden proposal, but did not hesitate to say that, if Flo could be induced to find happiness at home, it was the best that could be made, for her at least.

'Dear Mrs. Burnester, you and the vicar are always thinking of generous deeds,' she added. 'But if Dolly should not take a fancy to Marjory, or think her too young, the plan would never answer.'

'All plans answer if made in faith, and I have been asking for this very coincidence ever since I was obliged to give up Dolly's education. But we will think it

over. I suppose the children are settled with you for some time. At least, so says Mr. Burmester. But I never anticipate the future. Sufficient for the day is not only the evil but the good thereof. I am sure you see life, as I do, in this light.'

'I strive to live by the day,' replied Belle. 'But, what with one thing and another, I find myself looking ahead more than I ought. What with this fortune and the children and the uncertainty of weather and crops, to say nothing of the difficulty of paying one's way, I find myself often very faithless.'

'You have many blessings, Belle. Above all, you have health,' sighed Mrs. Burmester, rising with much difficulty; for Dolly came in to say tea was ready.

Belle offered her arm, and Mrs. Burmester's weakness was apparent in her slow and painful walk from one room to the other. Still, she headed the table

and tea-tray, and looked with smiling satisfaction on the four children, seated in expectation of cakes and jam. Dolly and Weatherley were side-by-side, in full talk, while Marjory superintended Mamy. Mrs. Burmester asked Belle to take the seat opposite her, and cut the cake and bread.

In came Mr. Burmester and Miss Dulcey.

‘Now, children, I am one of you,’ said the latter, sitting down by Mamy, while the vicar took his seat at his wife’s elbow, a post he always filled.

They were married lovers, and never happy if long apart. The weakness of the wife served to strengthen the devotion of the husband, and Dolly clenched the band that united them by the clasp of filial love.

Miss Dulcey was always wide awake, and never more keenly so than when with children. They were frightened at her at

first, but she soon made them feel at home, and managed to amuse them as much as she did her older friends.

‘When are you going to give your afternoon tea, Miss Dulcey?’ asked Dolly. ‘Weatherley and Marjory would like to come. I told them about it.’

‘Already!’ ejaculated Miss Dulcey. ‘How much you have said in a short time, and how quickly you make acquaintances. Proper young ladies take a long time before they become confidential with proper young gentlemen.’

‘But I’m not a proper young lady, Miss Dulcey. I can’t bear proper people,’ said Dolly.

‘Then you’re like a charwoman I know in London, who says she wouldn’t belong to the gentry for anything, “because they are so proper,”’ laughed Miss Dulcey.

Mr. Burmester laughed also, and his wife and the children caught the contagion,

and laughed, whether they understood the joke or no. Mamy laughed loudest of all, and clapped her little hands.

‘I have brought down the house! I have gained an encore!’ cried Miss Dulcey, enthusiastically kissing the child.

The door opened at that moment, and a gentleman came in unannounced.

‘I couldn’t resist the laughter, so I didn’t wait to have the bell answered,’ he said. ‘What a merry party! Dolly, I heard your voice very loud indeed.’

‘No; it was Miss Dulcey’s. She always makes us laugh,’ said Dolly.

But Miss Dulcey laughed no longer. On the contrary, she looked singularly grave all of a sudden. So did Mr. and Mrs. Burmester. They rose to shake hands with the new comer, and hemmed and hawed slightly as they spoke to him. He was a large, strongly-built man, of middle height and florid complexion. A

fine man, people called him, and so he was, if width, a good carriage, and a head well-set on broad shoulders constitute fineness. He looked in face younger than he was; for the top of his head was bald, and his hair and whiskers were beginning to foretell age. His pleasant voice bespoke a genial nature, and his manner was kind and courteous. He looked with marked interest on the children; but, perceiving a certain constraint in Mrs. Burmester's manner, said—

‘I hope I haven't interfered with your tea by coming in so abruptly. These children are strangers to me, and perhaps I shall frighten away their appetites.’

‘You are always welcome; but——’ replied Mrs. Burmester.

‘You will join our party; but——’ said the vicar.

‘The long and short of it all is, Hewson, that these children are your grandchildren,’

said Miss Dulcey, laying a hand on Mamy's pretty curls. 'You must know it sooner or later, since they are living at Castle Farm. I think you know Miss Dauncey. She is taking care of them during their father's absence in search of a fortune that will buy us all up.'

Belle moved uneasily. She had never spoken to her brother's father-in-law since that brother's marriage, and was greatly distressed at this unexpected encounter. Squire Weatherley, for he it was, was more than distressed—he was angered and confounded. He made a sort of haughty bow to Belle, and turned on his half-sister with the words—

'This is all your doing, Dulcey. You have to answer for Amy's death and the consequent disgrace. I did not expect this insult here, at the vicarage.'

Miss Dulcey, nothing daunted, with her hand still on Mamy's head, confronted him.

They were both standing near the tea-table while the four children looked and listened, and Mr. and Mrs. Burmester and Belle stood in much alarm.

‘There can be no insult in giving your grandchildren the tea and cake you won’t give them yourself,’ said Miss Dulcey, who could be provoking on occasion. ‘Certainly Mrs. Burmester intended none, and it was impossible to imagine that you would join us unbidden. You needn’t be ashamed of ’em. They are far advanced in the education of the day—know more than you or I—and as for Weatherley——’

‘Weatherley! Who dared give him my name?’ cried the aggrieved squire, laying his hand on Miss Dulcey’s shoulder somewhat roughly.

The answer came from an unlooked-for quarter, and Miss Dulcey got an unexpected ally. The boy, who had been named after his mother’s family at her particular

wish, suddenly joined the belligerents. He had been growing redder and redder, and, so to say, swelling with indignation during the interview. He mastered himself, however, sufficiently to say, as he faced his grandfather, with tolerable calmness and the assurance of a man—

‘I am Weatherley Dauncey. Mother would have me christened by her family name, though father didn’t wish it. She told me so often when she used to talk of you, and say you were angry with her because she married father. Aunt Dulcey didn’t kill mother. She died of consumption, and all poor father and Dr. Silver could do wouldn’t save her. She——’

Here momentary emotion choked the boy’s voice, and Marjory broke in with—

‘She went to heaven ; God took her.’

‘Dod took her,’ echoed Mamy.

‘She wanted to live to see you, sir, but she couldn’t,’ continued Weatherley. ‘She

told me so, because I was the oldest, and poor father used to cry when she talked to him of going away from us. She said she would come down here and see you if she was able; but she was too weak to travel, Dr. Silver told her so. Miss Dulcey was always kind and good to poor mother, and to us all. We love her dearly.'

Miss Dulcey found herself in that uncomfortably hysterical state which lies between tears and laughter; but she managed to whisper to her champion that he had better be silent. He did hold his tongue for a few seconds; but, being of an aggressive spirit, he stood looking at his grandfather with that sort of unflinching air which is almost more irritating than words.

Squire Weatherley returned his gaze; he was not unmoved. His mouth quivered, and the hat he held in his hand trembled perceptibly. His eyes even fell before

the bold glance of his grandson, who had insensibly acquired the notion that all the family troubles were due to him. He was of a choleric temperament, as all the spectators knew, and he soon recovered his usual tone and carriage.

‘Who has put it into your head to browbeat me?’ he asked, angrily; then added, turning to his sister, ‘Is this your work, Dulcey, as well as the rest of it?’

‘I didn’t mean to browbeat you, sir, only to defend Aunt Dulcey,’ returned Weatherley, with an air that made the squire smile in spite of his antagonism. ‘Neither she nor anybody else set me on, and we none of us want anything from you. Marjory and I mean to work, and Aunt Belle will take care of Mamy.’

‘Aunt Belle! Mamy!’ echoed the little one, suddenly kneeling up on her chair, and facing Weatherley.

The name and the sweet face stayed

an angry answer from the squire, for who could resist Mamy's innocent eyes? They looked at him for a moment, and something frightened the child, so that the little mouth pursed up, the head drooped on the left shoulder, and Belle who was watching her, saw that she was going to cry. She caught her up in her arms, and, approaching the squire and Weatherley, said—

‘I am very sorry that this has happened. I hope you will believe it was unintentional, Mr. Weatherley. The children are only staying with us for a time, while my brother has gone to Canada. I will be more careful in future. I quite understand how unpleasant it is for you.’

While Belle was speaking, Marjory got off her chair, and crept to her side, so that the squire was confronted by his three grandchildren. As he was not hard-hearted, only grievously offended, he

could not fail to be moved. He was so, apparently, for he was overcome by sudden emotion when he saw Many; moved towards her; changed his mind; retreated, and, with a bow to Belle, left the room. Mr. Burmester followed him, but he was out of the house and on the drive before he reached the door.

CHAPTER IX.

WEATHERLEY.

WHEN Mr. Burmester returned to the dining-room after his pursuit of the squire, he found a very disturbed party. Weatherley was much abashed—a frame of mind unusual to him; but he feared that he had been rude and even impertinent, which he rarely, if ever, was. Marjory had her arm about his neck, striving to comfort him, and Mamy was sobbing in Aunt Belle's arms.

‘Naughty man!’ she had said, when her grandfather went away, which greatly delighted Miss Dulcey, and distressed Belle.

‘I am very sorry I made such a commotion, sir,’ said Weatherley, when Mr. Burmester returned. He knew that he could apologise better to a man than a woman. ‘I didn’t mean to be rude, or to offend anyone; only I got angry, and I felt as if I couldn’t help it. I know he ought to have spoken to me first, and I shouldn’t have said a word, only he abused Aunt Dulcey and spoke of mother.’

Mr. Burmester laid his hand kindly on the boy’s shoulder, and was about to give him a little good advice concerning restraint of temper and respect of elders, when Miss Dulcey broke forth with—

‘My dear Weatherley, you couldn’t have done better if you had studied your speech with one of your exams—is that what you call your professors? I know my brother. Whether anything comes of it or not, he doesn’t think the worse of you for speaking your mind. If more people followed your

example, there wouldn't be half so much deceit as there is in the world. Now let us forget all about it and finish our tea.'

But neither Weatherley nor the others could 'forget all about it.' The unexpected episode disturbed the little party, and even Molly was silenced. She heaped dainties on Weatherley's plate, nevertheless, with solicitous kindness; for, although she only half understood what had passed, she reflected that 'a boy's very own grandfather ought to be kind to him,' and it pained her to see his manner so changed. But he had been always taught respect and obedience to his elders, and with all his self-reliance he seldom transgressed the precepts of his parents. He could not, therefore, get over his own independence, though he said afterwards he should do it again if he had the chance.

When Belle repeated the little scene to her father, he highly praised the boy's

spirit, and when he afterwards met Miss Dulcey, they rejoiced over it in most improper style.

‘But the lad hasn’t been himself ever since,’ said Mr. Dauncey. ‘He’s a queer fellow, and not unlike the squire himself, only with a touch of Charlie’s conscientiousness. Fortunately he isn’t a bit like me.’

‘Fortunately,’ echoed Miss Dulcey, who knew that Dauncey expected a compliment. ‘What he’s got he’ll keep, or I’m much mistaken.’

‘And you don’t think that’s my turn, Miss Dulcey?’

‘Do you, Mr. Dauncey?’

He couldn’t say that he did, so they parted, as usual—he in a huff, she rejoicing that she had been able to give him a bit of her mind in a polite way.

During the ensuing week Weatherley requested permission to explore the

country, as he expressed it. He wanted to see its beauties far and near.

‘I have been half over London by myself, Aunt Belle,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t be lost here. I already know my way about the farm and village, and want to see the neighbourhood.’

‘All right, nothing like independence,’ said his grandfather; so Master Weatherley began his wanderings.

The truth was that he wanted to see Weatherley Court. The boy was a lover of nature, and had a poetic turn, and sometimes wrote verses, which he read to his admirer, Marjory. She saw talents where other people would have found platitudes, so he began to fancy himself a genius. Not that his poetic moods were the cause of his desire to roam; but a strange, perplexed excitement caused by his interview with Squire Weatherley.

Accordingly, one morning, he started

with a pocketful of sandwiches, and permission to be absent until tea-time. He had made friends with all the men about the farm, who had given him the needed information concerning the way to the Court.

He wished to go by the fields, and accordingly soon forsook the country road for them. The Court was about three miles from the actual village of Hollyfield, but less as the crow flies. The crow, however, has no obstacles to surmount, and could make the journey in no time; whereas Weatherley found innumerable stiles, by-paths, brooks, and coppices, which impeded his steps at every turn. He lost his way, and strayed far afield, and, like many another self-confident person, found that he had trusted overmuch to his own ability, or his 'organ of locality,' as he phrased it. He went east when he should have gone west; but he

was so enchanted with the scenery that he almost forgot the Court and its owner in the perfect enjoyment of the moment.

Rover was with him, and led him many dances ; so that, what between his delight at nature and his anxiety about the dog, the hours flew by with wonderful rapidity. Why do the present-day hours fly so rapidly both to young and old ? They never seem to lag as they used to do years ago. As to Weatherley, the days were never long enough for him, and had it not been for his fine appetite, he would have been suddenly benighted, and not have known the hour until so warned. As it was, he took out his sandwiches and shared them with Rover. Seated on the trunk of a tree, with meadows smiling, streams singing, and birds warbling all around him, it was no wonder that his heart was so glad that he clean forgot both Court and Farm, and gave himself up to the pleasures of the moment. He

had never seen the genuine country until this visit to his grandfather; and he began to compare the excitement and noise of London with the serenity and peace of Hollyfield, and to whisper to himself, 'I wish I could be a farmer—or—or—a squire.' He was always wishing he could be something or other; but the sights and sounds of his present were the fairest and sweetest that he had ever seen or heard. He almost sighed as he remembered that he had quite made up his mind to take the first thing that offered, even if it was to be an office-boy.

'I wonder where we are, Rover? We have seen no big house as yet,' he said aloud, while Rover wagged his tail and sniffed the pleasant air.

He thought he could not be wrong if he kept to a path that lay through a plantation of spruce fir; so, leaving the sun-illumined meadows, he entered the comparative gloom.

But he was soon engaged in speculations upon the tall trees and the sunbeams that waltzed with the shadows across the red path, and the squirrels that sat so gravely in the branches. He and Rover had a happy time sporting about, but at last he began to think that the plantation was endless, and wondered if it led to the Court.

He heard the sound of an axe, and went in its direction, until he saw a man cutting up a fallen tree.

‘Am I far from Weatherley Court?’ he asked.

‘About two miles, young gentleman. The squire was here not so long ago,’ was the answer.

‘I came from Castle Farm, and wanted to go straight to the Court,’ said Weatherley.

‘Haw, haw! you be miles out o’ the way. Anigh three miles from the Farm, and two from the Court. You must a’ took the wrong path at Little Ford. The Court is

awver there, east like, and the Farm is awver there, west like.'

The woodcutter extended his arms right and left, like a directing post, and Weatherley resolved to return to the Farm, and try for the Court another day. He inquired the shortest way home, and received so many directions in return that he thought he had better retrace his steps. He was much mortified, for it seemed very ignominious to lose his way among the fields, when he had never lost it in the labyrinth of the London streets. But then, he reflected, there was always a policeman at hand, whose arms beat all the directing posts in the world.

'Be you young Measter Dauncey?' asked the countryman.

'Yes, how did you guess?' replied Weatherley, quite elated at the question. It seemed grand to be known by a stranger in that remote place.

‘You do favour the squire, and he be your grandfeyther just so much as Farmer Dauncey,’ replied the man; ‘and I heerd as you was come from Lunnon, and that Measter Charlie was gone to look after a great fortun’ in Merikey. I hopes as he’ll get it. He wur a nice chap, he wur.’

‘Thank you for liking my father,’ said Weatherley, holding out his hand impulsively, which the woodcutter grasped just as if he had caught it in a wedge.

The lad retraced his way through the plantation, which was easy enough, for there was a bridle-path from one end to the other; but it was not quite so easy to find it among the meadows. As might have been expected, he lost it again. He and Rover wandered about until they were tired and the afternoon far advanced. He had promised to be at home for tea, and began to be alarmed. Espying a cottage not far off, he made

for it, and was told that he was now nearer the Court than the Farm. But he was, happily, not far from the road which led to both, and the mistress of the cottage kindly escorted him to it. He had miscalculated his strength, and was quite exhausted when he climbed a high stile and found himself in the country road. He sat down on a heap of stones to rest a few minutes, when the sound of a horse's hoofs attracted him. He looked up, and who should the rider be but Squire Weatherley. He had a hound at his horse's hoofs, with whom Rover hastened to make acquaintance. While they were finding out whether they liked one another the squire glanced round at them, and encountered a pair of dark eyes fixed upon him. He recognised his grandson, and was about to touch up his horse and ride on, when Weatherley got up hastily from his stony seat, and laid a hand on the shining neck of the horse.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ he began.

‘Take care! Take care!’ exclaimed the squire.

The warning was not unnecessary, for the horse, a spirited animal, commenced prancing and curvetting, and in so doing threw Weatherley down upon the heap of stones. The squire was off his back in a moment. His grandson was almost as quickly on his feet. Both looked pale; the one from fright, the other because he was both wearied and bruised.

‘I beg your pardon, sir; I only wanted to say a word,’ began Weatherley, breathlessly.

‘Never try to stop a horse in that way. Are you hurt?’ asked the squire.

‘No, thank you, I—I—am not hurt,’ stammered Weatherley. ‘But I just wanted to say that I am very sorry if I was rude to you the other day. I know I had no right to speak to you at all, much less to browbeat you, as you called it. I hope

you will forgive me. Indeed, I did not wish to offend you.'

'What did you mean by saying you wanted nothing of me?' asked the squire. 'That was rude enough.'

'Yes, it was,' said Weatherley; 'but I only meant—well, I meant that I didn't want to curry favour because you are rich and we are poor—because you are a squire and father only a doctor, and—and—Grandfather Dauncey only a farmer. I believe that was what I meant.'

'And what did you mean by your mother's wishing to come here?'

'She wanted to see you, sir. She wanted you to forgive her.'

'I did forgive her, and told Dulcey to tell her so; but she is so contradictory that I daresay she never did it.'

'Aunt Dauncey is sure——' Weatherley paused; he was afraid of again championing Miss Dulcey.

‘I understand. Tell me exactly what your mother said.’

‘She said that she wanted to tell you how sorry she was to have offended you, but that she had been very, very happy with father and us children. She said she should dearly like to see the Court once more, and her aunt, Miss Weatherley, who had brought her up. She told me if ever I saw you I was to say so, very gently; and, oh, sir, I forgot the gently, and was rude. Will you forgive me, for— for——’

The boy was going to add ‘for her sake,’ when a dizziness came over him, and he was obliged to sit down on the stones. The squire was endeavouring to master the emotion he could but feel, in order to justify himself for the hardness he was conscious he had shown his only child, when he remarked that the colour was leaving the boy’s cheeks. He was holding

his horse's bridle with one hand, and the stones were beyond the reach of the other.

‘What is the matter?’ he exclaimed.

‘Nothing—only—I am tired,’ stammered Weatherley.

The squire shouted at the top of his voice,

‘Mrs. Richards! come here, Mrs. Richards;’ and, as he was a sort of Nimrod in the chase, his voice was really stentorian.

The woman who had shown Weatherley the road was standing outside her cottage watching such movements of the squire's horse as she could see through the stile; and she answered the call with great alacrity.

‘Just hold my horse. He is safe enough,’ said Squire Weatherley, going up to his grandson. ‘Bless my soul! there is blood upon the stones. You have hurt yourself,’ he added to the boy.

‘Not much, I think, only——’ said Weatherley, trying to rise.

The squire helped him, and saw that blood was flowing from the back of his head. In his fall he had cut it against a stone.

‘It isn’t much,’ said the squire, examining it. ‘Let me bind it up. Fetch some water, Mrs. Richards. Nevermind the horse; I’ll tie him up to the gate. (Quiet! Silverking, quiet!’ he added, stroking his steed, and hanging the rein over one of the posts of the gate.

Mrs. Richards hastened in search of water; Silverking found some appetizing dainty in the hedge; the dogs gambolled at will; and the squire seated himself on the heap of stones by the side of his grandson, took out a silk handkerchief from his pocket, and bound up the wound.

‘It is only a cut, it isn’t deep; I’ve

had worse scores of times,' he said, reassuringly.

'I don't mind, sir,' said Weatherley, making an effort at resolution. 'But I—I—am sorry to give—so much trouble.'

The squire rejoiced that he did not faint, as he had expected, and was thankful to see the colour slowly return to his white face. The water, which Mrs. Richards soon brought, revived him, and he made an effort to stand on his feet. In doing so, he put his hand into the squire's.

'You are a brave fellow,' said the squire, pressing it involuntarily; 'but you won't be able to walk a mile just yet. The Court is nearer than the village. Perhaps you had better come there. Can you ride?' He spoke with great hesitancy.

'A little; but I must go home. I am all right now,' said Weatherley, with his usual decision.

‘Then mount Silverking, and he shall carry you half-way. Run on to Castle Farm, Mrs. Richards, and say that Master Dauncey has hurt himself slightly, and tell one of the men to meet him at the four roads. Don’t name me. That is only a stone’s-throw from the farm, and it won’t hurt you to walk that length.’

The squire was accustomed to obedience, and few people said him nay. Mrs. Richards was off like a shot, and Weatherley lifted on the saddle by the squire nearly as quickly. He remonstrated, however, saying that he had never ridden such a horse as Silverking; but the squire assured him that he was gentle as a lamb, and he meant to lead him as far as Four Roads.

‘Oh, sir, how kind!’ ejaculated Weatherley, whose strength, both of mind and body, was nearly spent.

‘Don’t talk about it. I hate nine-days’ wonders,’ returned the squire, who real-

ised what this slight accident would entail in the way of gossip.

He soon perceived that his grandson had some difficulty in keeping his seat, and feared lest he should fall off. Weatherley had good courage, however, and held manfully by the saddle-bow. He felt giddy, and fancied the objects he passed were moving.

The squire walked by his side, striving to keep him straight with one hand, while he held the bridle with the other. It was a difficult operation.

‘You are sure you don’t feel faint?’ he said.

‘Oh, no! I am all right, and can walk the rest of the way, if you will let me get off,’ said Weatherley, in a jerky voice. ‘Indeed, sir, I am very sorry.’

‘It was no fault of yours, only be warned never to meddle with strange horses. Who on earth can this be?’ returned the squire,

the sounds of carriage wheels causing the final question.

It was instantly answered by the arrival of Miss Sancy, driven by her mistress. They pulled up right in face of Silverking and his burden. Ben speedily jumped out of the rumble.

‘Mrs. Richards tells me you have had some sort of a spill,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘What’s the matter? Weatherley is about to faint. Help him off, Ben. Why, you’ve turned good Samaritan, Hewson. But I know you don’t like your right hand to know what your left does, so I’ll take him home, and nobody will be the wiser.’

‘I’m—all—right,’ muttered Weatherley.

‘You don’t look so, to judge from your bandage,’ said Miss Dulcey.

The squire and Ben helped the boy off the horse, and led him to the pony-carriage.

‘I would have taken him to the Court, but he preferred coming home,’ said the squire to his sister, with a sort of apologetic manner. Then to Ben—‘Either come or send this evening to let me know how he is.’

‘Indeed, I’m all right now,’ said Weatherley, and he spoke without hesitation.

The squire shook hands with his sister, and then took Weatherley’s and grasped it firmly. Without another word he turned and remounted the horse which Ben was holding. He reined Silverking in for a moment to watch Miss Dulcey drive off, and to see that his grandson kept his seat, then muttering, ‘He’s a fine fellow,’ rode homewards, followed by his hound.

CHAPTER X.

DOLLY.

BELLE had been hard at work during her nephew's wanderings. She was in no wise anxious about him till tea-time arrived.

'Boys will be boys. He won't be back till dark,' said her father; and they and the little girls sat down to tea.

The meal was nearly over when Molly rushed in with the news that Miss Dulcey was coming in the pony-carriage. Belle rose instantly, and went to the front door to meet her.

'Don't be alarmed, Belle,' shouted Miss Dulcey before she pulled up; 'Weatherley

has tumbled down and cut his head.' She had with difficulty extracted the particulars from him.

Belle helped Weatherley to the dining-room, and no sooner was he placed in his grandfather's easy-chair than he did actually faint. Everybody was in consternation. Belle, however, was always ready for an emergency. She had smelling salts and sal-volatile at hand which she promptly administered, and the boy soon recovered consciousness. Meanwhile, she perceived that blood had saturated the handkerchief that bound his head, and she told Marjory to take Mamy to look at Miss Saucy; but Miss Saucy had been sent home.

'I can't go away from Weatherley,' said Marjory.

'Tan't do away,' echoed Mamy.

'I'm—all—right,' said Weatherley; and this comprehensive phrase reassured them.

It was fortunate, for Mr. Dauncey was about to send off for all the doctors in the neighbourhood.

‘I fell and cut my head against a stone,’ explained Weatherley. ‘The squire bound it up; he was very kind, and it isn’t worth talking about.’

‘The squire!’ ejaculated Dauncey.

Molly came in with a roll of diachylon plaster, bandages, cold water, etc., for which Belle had sent her. Belle, with her usual decision, cleared the room of all but Miss Dulcey; and they, between them, staunched the blood and bound up the wound. It was in no way dangerous, and the faintness had been brought on by over-fatigue and loss of blood.

‘Aunt Belle does all things well,’ said Weatherley, kissing the shapely hand that was so helpful, and trying to laugh at Miss Dulcey’s rhyme.

They got him to bed, gave him a good

tea, and heard the history of his day. Then, at his request, his grandfather and sisters were admitted to say good-night, and he soon fell asleep. But he was not allowed to rest long; for, to the general astonishment, Mr. Blyth, the doctor from Orchardson village, arrived. He had received a note from Squire Weatherley, sent by special messenger, asking him to go at once to Castle Farm to see one of the young Daunceys, who had met with an accident. He had come as quickly as he could.

Of course he saw Weatherley, and said all had been done that was necessary, adding that Belle was as good as any doctor. She and Miss Dulcey, putting two and two together, believed they saw the guiding of the Divine Hand in the slight accident; but women are sanguine. Still, Miss Dulcey, as soon as she returned to the Gables, despatched Ben with a note to her brother, discreetly worded, to the effect

that the boy was in no way dangerously hurt, and that everybody was much obliged to him for sending Mr. Blyth. Ben was not altogether pleased at having to carry this missive ; but he was consoled for his late journey by fiveshillings from the squire, who bade him hold his tongue and say nothing to anyone about him.

Ben was not given to conversation, so he obeyed ; but before the end of the next day the squire's encounter with Charles Dauncey's son was discussed far and wide, and various opinions were hazarded as to results. But there were none—at least, as far as the world knew.

‘The fact is, he don't like any of us ; and I'm sure we don't like him,’ said Mr. Dauncey.

‘Oh, I like him very much ; he is quite different from what I expected,’ said Weatherley, who was much disappointed that the squire had not come to inquire for him.

Mr. Blyth came again, and said that he had written to Mr. Weatherley, at his particular request, and told him that the hurt was of no great consequence, and that the lad would recover in a few days.

‘I did not venture to say “your grandson,”’ added the doctor, ‘but I did say that he was a plucky young fellow, and seemed very grateful to the squire for his help.’

Blyth and Dauncey were old friends, and there was a general feeling in the countryside that it was time the squire should forget his grievances. But he was not one of those who forget.

Weatherley was weaker than his friends imagined, and was kept in bed a few days. Marjory waited upon him, and Mamy sat on his bed or nursed her doll in his room the whole time. As to his grandfather, he fidgeted in and out incessantly, and he received visits from Mr. Burmester and Miss Dulcey, to say nothing of inquiries

from the neighbours, until he fancied himself a hero. He had a good deal of fever, and his mind ran much on his father.

‘Is there a letter to-day?’ was his constant inquiry, and Belle had much trouble to quiet him.

‘Flo’s parlour,’ as the second sitting-room was called, was the scene of his convalescence. Belle had found his sickness an anxious addition to her many duties; but she had nursed him through it, with the help of Marjory, who was a little woman before her time, as Weatherley was a little man. They had learnt much from their mother’s long illness and their father’s consequent grief and prostration; learnt their lessons early and well. Flo’s parlour was a very pretty room. Flo called herself æsthetic, and had introduced some of the ornamentation which has become fashionable since that much-abused word has been bandied about. But Flo’s taste was

too refined, to use another much-abused word, to overdo ornament. Her shelves and brackets were not numerous, and the old china she had placed upon them was really good, and had descended from many generations of Daunceys. So had two or three carved and tapestry-seated chairs which, like Belle's favourite bureau, would have fetched a fortune at Christy's. Her father set his face against what he called 'turning a farm into a china shop,' and would not let her hang his 'grandmother's plates and dishes' against the wall; so Flo was content with what Miss Dulcey called 'mitigated æstheticism.'

But the chief charm of Flo's parlour was its brightness. The sun was as kind to it as he was to the vicarage, and flooded it with light whensoever he condescended to pierce the mists of our uncertain climate. From the window the wide-spreading meadows and the winding brook

were visible, and Belle always said she could see the cowslips nod their golden heads in the spring-time whenever she looked out of it. But Belle had few moments to spare, either for looking out of window or for idling in Flo's parlour. Still, she was always longing for Flo's return, and thinking how empty that special room looked without her.

It was cheerful enough on that morning in early autumn when Weatherley came downstairs after his short spell of illness. There was a fire, and Marjory had spread all her store of books on a small round table, and the sofa was drawn near the fire, and Rover, who always smelt fire, was asleep on the rug. Marjory had opened the piano and put a piece of music on it, which she intended to play for Weatherley's benefit, and Mamy, in imitation, had laid another piece on her stool, to 'sing "Tarley is my darling" to boder.'

‘How funny it is, Aunt Belle. I feel so odd and giddy,’ said Weatherley, as he came into the parlour, leaning on Belle’s arm, and followed closely by his sisters.

‘You are weak, dear,’ answered Belle, helping him to the sofa.

In burst Molly with a cup of beef-tea.

‘Take you this, Master Weatherley. Name o’ goodness, you are looking worse without the bandages than you was looking with them.’

The truth was that more blood had flowed from the wound than even the doctor knew.

‘I wish somebody would tell the squire how giddy I am. I’m sure he would be sorry,’ said Weatherley, who had been impressed by the kindness of his grandfather. ‘He bound up my head, and held me on his horse, and was almost as gentle as you, Aunt Belle.’

‘It was only natural,’ said Belle.

‘Belle! Belle! where are you? You are wanted,’ shouted Mr. Dauncey in the passage, and ‘always Belle! Belle!’ grumbled Molly, who ran out to tell him how she was occupied.

But Belle went out as her father came in, and found Dolly Burmester awaiting her in the dining-room. The girl looked mysterious, and glanced round to see that nobody was near.

‘I was coming to see Weatherley,’ she whispered, ‘and I met the squire. He asked me where I was going, and I told him. He said, “Make haste, and run back to me. I want to know how the boy is.” I thought I had better ask you, Belle, because the squire was angry with Weatherley, and perhaps I might “make a muddle” of my answer, as father says I often do.’

‘Come in and see for yourself,’ said

Belle. 'But say nothing of the squire to anyone.'

She was wise in her generation, for she knew that Dolly would speak the exact truth. They went into Flo's parlour.

'Dolly has come to ask after you, Weatherley,' she said. 'But she mustn't stay.'

Dolly poured out a multitude of questions. She felt strangely important, and, like many another ambassador, wished to know everything and tell nothing. Weatherley answered them, and greatly enlarged on the squire's kindness.

'He was awfully good to me,' he said.

'So he is to me, always,' returned Dolly.

'Awfully dood,' echoed Mamy, who had climbed up on the sofa, and was nestling between Weatherley and her grandfather.

'I think he had better not talk any more to-day, Dolly. You shall come again to-morrow,' said diplomatic Belle.

So Dolly ran off with her burden of news, and Belle watched her, wondering how it would end.

The squire was making believe to look in at the school when Dolly ran breathlessly up the hill. All the children had risen, made their best curtseys, and were looking awe-struck; for it was not his custom to visit the school. The mistress was just coming forward to ask whether he would like to hear them go through their lessons, when he espied Dolly.

‘Not to-day, some other time; glad to see them so industrious and well-behaved. Good-morning, Miss Cross; good-bye, children. Learn your lessons well, and never forget your catechism. It contains the whole duty of man.’

He felt that he had done his duty very imperfectly that day, since he had been somewhat of a hypocrite in pretending interest where he did not feel it,

and striving to conceal it where he did.

Dolly had been composing her speech during her hurried run, and had resolved to omit the patient's christian name, which she remembered angered the squire. But, when she reached him, she forgot her speech, and blurted out,

‘Weatherley is better : but he looks as white as a sheet. He says he’s all right, and that you were awfully good to him.’

‘Thank you, Dolly. You needn’t say that I sent you to inquire, or rather asked you to let me know how he is. It is between you and me, you understand,’ said the squire.

‘I couldn’t help telling Belle,’ returned Dolly. ‘But she won’t say ; I’ll ask her to keep our secret.’

The squire smiled at Dolly’s importance, said he was going to see his sister, and parted from her at the steps that led to the Gables.

Now Dolly knew, as did everybody else, that the squire rarely visited Miss Dulcey. Indeed, there was a coolness between them caused by her having taken his daughter's side when she made what he considered an unequal match. So Dolly stood a moment to watch him toil up those steep stone steps, then ran off to her mother to bid her look at the unusual sight.

Miss Dulcey was in the garden giving orders to Ben at the top of her voice. She had her huge black hat on, and looked much like a Japanese. Her back was towards her brother, but Ben faced him. He heard the words,

‘Lawk a massy, Miss Dulcey, if there bain’t the squire!’

‘Did you never see him before?’ asked Miss Dulcey, who naturally thought he was somewhere about the vicarage.

But Ben went off into various signs, which caused his mistress to turn and see

her unexpected visitor, who was approaching her private door.

‘Mind you do exactly what I tell you, Ben. The lawn and paddock must be both mown, and we’ll have the tea after the games,’ said Miss Dulcey, pretending to take her brother’s visit as a matter of course.

But she was a bad dissembler, and, as Ben said afterwards, ‘Her got red all over, and her ran off as frisky as a Welsh colt.’

She met the squire at the door with both hands extended, and the words—

‘Glad to see you at last, Hewson. Why, it’s years since you were here last. How’s Margaretta?’ She hasn’t been for an age.’

‘She says you have not been to the Court,’ replied the squire, stiffly; for, with the best intentions in the world, Miss Dulcey always contrived to rub him up the wrong way.

‘You know, Hewson, visiting can’t be entirely on one side, even between brothers and sisters, which we are in a half-and-half sort of way. But come in and have some luncheon; you are welcome as flowers in May.’

‘Thank you, Dulcey; let us rest here first.’ He went into the sanctum, and sat down in a really easy-chair, while his sister seated herself in her customary place before her well-covered library table. She knew what had brought him, so she cut short some commonplace remark about the weather by dashing recklessly into the subject he wanted to begin.

‘I know what you have come for, Hewson; so you needn’t beat about the bush. The boy you were really kind to last week is nearly well—your grandson and my great-nephew. It makes one feel old as well as important to prefix “grand” and “great” to one’s relationships; but it’s

no good to ignore them. Facts are stubborn things.'

'I hear that the lad is better, and I did not come to ask about him specially,' said the squire. 'I wanted a word with you.'

'That sounds awful! That is just what our father used to say when we had displeased him. I hope I haven't displeased you, Hewson?'

'You are always displeasing me, Dulcey; but we won't quarrel if we can help it. I want to know if you have heard anything of Charles Dauncey, and whether he has any chance of this fortune.'

Miss Dulcey at once told her brother all that she knew of the 'next-of-kin,' save that she had paid Charlie's expenses to America. The squire listened with interest, and said, when she ended her details, 'that Jabez's son would probably turn up, and the Daunceys be worse off than before.'

‘Under such circumstances, what will become of those children?’ he asked, hesitating.

‘God feeds the ravens,’ she replied.

‘I should not mind educating the boy, provided he were given up to me entirely. I never wish to see his father, or to have anything to do with old Dauncey. Do you think this could be managed?’ asked the squire.

Miss Dulcey hopped off her chair in her surprise at this proposal.

‘It would depend on the management,’ she said. ‘The Daunceys are as proud as Lucifer, and the boy seems to have their spirit of independence. But it would be a right thing for you to do.’

She should have omitted that last clause.

‘There is no right in the matter,’ he said, testily. ‘Where was your right when you abetted that—that—unfortunate marriage?’

‘I am glad you have asked me that question, Hewson. I had no right; but I could not let Amy be married from a wretched lodging, while I had a house in town. I knew she was bent on leaving you, at all risks. Had you been less severe, it would have been different; but I don’t blame you. She came to me, as you know, or ought to know, unexpected by me. She threw herself upon me, so to say. She said that if I would not take her in, she would go to Mansel, your old valet, whose wife would receive her. She never told me what passed between you and her. She was miserable, and the long and the short of the story was, that Charles Dauncey, who was the weaker of the two, joined her; and I, perhaps, the weakest of all, let them marry quietly from my house.’

‘Enough! enough!’ groaned the squire. ‘It was a wretched business. But this boy! He is really a fine fellow, and I

don't know which to admire most, his defence of you or his apology for having offended me. Moreover, he brought a message from his mother. I have been in a sort of purgatory ever since, and must do something to get out of it.'

Miss Dulcey was astonished, and for once in her life did not know what to say. Her brother was a proud, reticent, and, she fancied, unforgiving man; but here was 'a touch of feeling,' as unexpected as it was welcome. After a long pause, and more reflection than she usually gave to any subject, she said—

'I will consult Belle—Miss Dauncey, I mean. She has the common sense of the family, and will do nothing rashly. She is prudent, and would not compromise you; neither will I, glad as I am that you like the boy. And, Hewson, I have a sort of apology to make, since apologies seem the fashion. I didn't wish to offend you.

Forgive me, and let us make it up, as we used to do when I was a troublesome child. I am not much more now.'

'Ah, Dulcey!' ejaculated the squire, holding out his hand.

Just as she took it, luncheon was announced, and they went hand-in-hand to the dining-room.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS MARGARETTA.

MISS DULCEY was on her best behaviour. She tried to avoid every subject that could irritate her brother, but in so doing she irritated herself, for she was accustomed to say out whatever she thought, and it was pain and grief to her to bridle her tongue. Not that she ever wished to give it the rein to annoy other people ; but everybody expected a wholesome ‘bit of her mind’ from uncompromising Miss Dulcey. Luncheon proceeded amicably, if stiffly, and the subject of the ‘grandson and great-nephew’ was not renewed in

the presence of the 'neat-handed Phillis' who waited. She was as anxious as her mistress to please the squire, who declared, when she was out of the room, that he would give up men-servants and take entirely to women, they were so much more attentive.

'That proves that Margaretta has all the trouble,' laughed Miss Dulcey. 'Why, all the mistresses are driven wild by their maids, who come for a month's holiday and change of air, or else condescend to scrub your floors in return for music or dancing lessons. At least, that is what my friends tell me; but, having no finishing masters at Hollyfield, I don't speak from experience. Ah! here comes an experimentalist who knows how to manage with one female domestic. Here's Belle. Will you see her? It seems as if she came on purpose; but I did not send for her. I must detain her, or she'll be off

when she hears that "I'm engaged," as people say when they've nothing to do.'

Miss Dulcey ran to meet Belle without waiting for her brother's answer. She told her, in breathless excitement, that the squire was with her, and had something important to say, and bade her wait until they had finished luncheon.

Belle had come to communicate Dolly's little adventure with him. Miss Dulcey ran back to the dining-room, leaving Belle in some trepidation ; for she was not without a certain fear of one who had shown so much antagonism to her family.

Miss Dulcey returned in due time, followed by the squire, who first bowed to Belle as she rose, then shook hands with her, as if on second thoughts. She had certainly never offended him, and had even apologised for her nephew's intemperate speech. Besides, there was something about Belle which inspired confidence. He

had occasionally met her, and had admired her manner—so free from self-consciousness and forwardness. Still he was either too proud or too stiff-necked to address her. Miss Dulcey, being neither, dashed into the subject like a restive horse, to the extreme danger of upsetting her companions.

‘Do you think Weatherley would like to have a first-class education, Belle?’ she began. ‘I’m not quite sure of him. Sometimes he seems good at books; at others, thinks of nothing but trade and that sort of thing.’

‘I am sure he would like a first-rate education, Miss Dulcey; but he knows he has no chance of one, unless——’

Belle paused.

‘Unless your father gets this fortune,’ supplied Miss Dulcey, glancing at her brother.

‘Has he any chance?’ put in the squire.

‘He thinks so, and it is by his being next-of-kin, unless his cousin’s son should be alive,’ replied Belle. ‘But it seems to me very uncertain.’

‘Would you call Weatherley a clever boy, Belle?’ asked Miss Dulcey. ‘I know he had all sorts of certificates framed and hung in—well, in the house, or lodging, or whatever it might be where——’

Belle came to Miss Dulcey’s aid. She knew she was about to say ‘hung in his mother’s room,’ and she had tact enough to know that the squire would not like the allusion.

‘I think he has good abilities,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he has too good an opinion of himself, but he is honest and straightforward. All he wants is to earn his own living. That is what he means when he talks of trade.’

‘We are no nearer the end than we

were at the beginning,' said Miss Dulcey. 'If my brother chose to educate Weatherley, would you all give him up entirely to him?'

This sudden question startled Belle, while it annoyed the squire. She recovered herself first.

'It would depend entirely on Charlie,' she said. 'Of course, we have no power. I should be only too thankful to feel sure that he was provided for.'

It was curious that both the squire and Miss Dulcey had forgotten the boy's father. He was in America, and Dauncey, senior, appeared to them his guardian for the time being. Indeed, the yielding and gentle Charlie was always in the background. Belle, however, was not going to lose this chance for Weatherley. She said, addressing the squire with her clear eyes as well as her pleasant voice,

'If you will allow me, I will write to my

brother. I will put the question direct to him. He has his children's interest at heart, and will, I am sure, do what is right. The boy is so grateful to you, sir, for your kindness to him, and for your excusing his rudeness, that he says he loves you very much indeed.'

Had Belle been prime diplomatist, if there is such a post, she could not have made a better hit than by that last phrase. No one is indifferent to being 'loved very much indeed,' and the gratuitous love of a child is very precious. The squire had felt drawn towards the boy by those invisible cords of kinship or heredity, or sympathy, call it whatever you will, and, when he heard that unselfish love was offered in return, he could scarcely believe it. However, it fairly drove from his mind, for the minute, the obnoxious clause he had added when he broached the subject to Miss Dulcey. Nothing was

said of the isolation from his father's family with which he had wound up before luncheon. All that Belle understood was that the squire might possibly adopt and educate his grandson, and she could see nothing against it. Her dear sister-in-law, Amy, would have been made happy, even in death, by the prospect, and she believed Charlie would be thankful.

‘I can hear the result through my sister,’ said the squire. ‘Perhaps you will not mention the subject to anyone else until you hear from—from America.’

‘Just as you wish,’ replied Belle, who would naturally have consulted her father.

She rose to go, feeling that she might be in the way. This was fortunate, since the squire was beginning to think of tabooing the Dauncey family in general, Weatherley excepted, and perhaps Belle, who had taken his fancy. He shook hands

with her more cordially than before, and wondered how she could seem so cheerful under the weight of anxiety that he knew must oppress her.

‘Ask Margaretta to come to my treat,’ said Miss Dulcey, when Belle disappeared.

‘Margaretta complains of being old and feeble, and I can scarcely get her to pay the most imperative visits,’ replied the squire.

‘Fiddle-de-dee! It is all over with one when one gives up. As well be dead and buried as to give up. Besides, one can always be of some use in the world, so long as one shuns the fossil age. Once reach that, and say good-bye to enjoyment.’

‘And how is one to avoid it, Dulcey?’

‘By keeping up your interest in all your fellow-creatures. Nobody fossilises so long as the heart is warm. Although I am what they call an old maid, I have children all

over the world. I have a black *protégée* in Central Africa, who writes to me as if I were her mother, and I am thinking of adopting another in New Guinea.'

'My dear Dulcey, you are incorrigible, but I am glad to hear your nonsense once more.'

The squire almost laughed, which did him as much good as it did Miss Dulcey, who was watching for signs of a reconciliation which she knew to be insecure.

'I did not make it clear to Miss Dauncey that I must have the entire control of the boy,' he said.

'How could you, Hewson? You couldn't quite say to the daughter, I'll have nothing to do with your father; or to a sister, I must ignore your brother. You must leave that part of the negotiation to me. Women manage delicate matters much better than men. It's the truth, though you don't think so.'

‘I know women are sadly meddlesome; but we won’t dispute. I told Tomkins to bring the horses to your stable. I can mount in the yard.’

They went together to the back of the house, and thence to the stable, where they found the squire’s groom and Ben in lively discourse. Miss Dulcey watched her brother mount his horse and ride off, followed by Tomkins.

‘He be a grand gentleman, and I be right glad to see him here again,’ said Ben, half aloud, half to himself.

When Miss Dulcey had stroked Miss Saucy, she bade Ben return with her to their interrupted consultation in the garden; and, having given some final orders, went in and wrote to her sister Margaretta. She was determined to resume the old family relations if possible, and in her note she insisted much on forgetting the past, and making the most of the present.

Miss Dulcey was in the habit of giving the school-children an annual—or, more properly, biennial—feed ; that is to say, she entertained them with tea and cake in the summer, and roast beef and plum-pudding in the winter. It was no wonder that they almost adored her, and that her word was their law ; indeed, it was pretty nearly the law of the village, subject to the superior decision of the court of appeal, over which the vicar presided. Not that anyone ventured to appeal against Miss Dulcey's judgment, though she would sometimes appeal against herself.

The treat was settled for the day but one after the squire's visit, and there was great excitement not only at the Gables, but at every homestead. Miss Dulcey's cook made and baked all the cakes, and had she not been the best-tempered of women she must have grumbled. But, as Miss Dulcey expressed it, 'Charlotte only laughs and

grows fat. If she goes on at this rate, the kitchen won't hold her.'

School treats are all so much alike that we will not attempt to describe Miss Dulcey's. She merely reversed the usual order of things, having games first in her paddock, and tea last in the school-room below her house. But we shall have something to say of her visitors. While the children were being marshalled at the school-house, to their infinite delight and admiration Squire Weatherley's carriage drove past, and it contained his sister, Miss Weatherley, or as she was more generally called Margaretta. Miss Dulcey, who was in the garden, was delighted also, and hastened to the principal entrance to meet her sister. The embrace that followed was cordial and affectionate.

'Dear Margaretta, this is kind !' said Miss Dulcey.

'I am so glad to come. Hewson wished

it. What has happened to make him so much more genial?' said Margaretta.

'Come into the drawing-room, and I will tell you.'

No sooner were they seated than Miss Dulcey rushed through the history of the squire and his grandson; to which her sister listened with a sort of tremulous attention, moving her hands nervously the while.

Miss Weatherley was a remarkable-looking woman, very different from her half-sister. She was a little older than the squire, and had lived with him and kept his house since the death of his wife. She had also brought up his only child Amy; had greatly indulged her, and greatly resented her marriage with Charlie Dauncey.

'Miss Weatherley always looks as if she had walked out of a picture-frame,' was the remark, and not an original one, that people were in the habit of making upon

her. She was tall, thin, pale, and elegant. Her white hair was in short curls on either side of her face, and might justly be called silvery, since it had a soft gleam on its unsullied snow; she always dressed in grey—silver-grey, they called it—and kept sufficiently to the fashion not to be reckoned peculiar. Out of doors, a white feather usually adorned her bonnet; indoors, white satin ribbon and the most faultless lace composed her cap. When the squire's friends discoursed of beauty, he always said, 'You should have seen Margarett when she was young!' and they readily believed him. But neither by word nor gesture did she manifest any consciousness of that departed grace which women find it so hard to forget.

'I am too old to undertake another child,' she said, when Miss Dulcey finished her story.

'Hark! here they come! You can see

them from the window, Margaretta. 'I must go out to receive them,' was Miss Dulcey's sole reply; and she left Miss Weatherley standing within the oriel, glancing at the pretty procession that mounted the steps.

The children were singing as they came, and the sweet hymn, 'There's a Friend for Little Children,' reached Miss Weatherley as she listened and gazed. Miss Dulcey received her guests with 'nods and wreathèd smiles' and many words of welcome, while the onlooker noted not only the school-children but the teachers. Mr. Burmester was foremost, then came Belle with her class, and Dolly with hers. Belle led Mamy by the hand, but Marjory had been promoted to a wee class of small children, and headed them importantly.

Others there were, of course, who have nothing to do with our veracious history, but who were all equally interested in the

treat. All these Miss Weatherley saw, and she looked curiously to see if she could recognise this great-nephew who was occupying her thoughts at the moment. She did recognise him amongst the boys, or fancied she did, from his likeness to her brother.

‘How they all bob and nod and smile at Dulcey,’ she mused. ‘I wish I were more lovable. But her mother was less reserved than mine. Hewson and I are more alike.’

She watched the procession till the last small boy disappeared, and then she heard shouts replace the hymn, and knew that the games had begun. She sighed as she remembered her youth and her own childhood’s happy pastimes. Not that she was either morbid or discontented; on the contrary, she strove and prayed continually to follow in the steps of her Divine Master.

She was meditating as to whether she should go out and join the merry party, when Miss Dulcey entered accompanied by Weatherley.

‘This is our nephew,’ she said. ‘He has strict orders to keep quiet and not to exert himself on account of the accident which I told you about, Margaretta. I thought you might entertain one another till tea-time. Tea at five, and a musical entertainment afterwards in the school-room.’

‘I cannot stay long, Dulcey,’ began Margaretta, nervously ; but Miss Dulcey was gone.

Miss Weatherley shook hands with her great-nephew and sat down. He did the same. They were silent for a few minutes not knowing what to say.

‘Your name is——?’ she volunteered at last.

‘Weatherley,’ he replied.

‘Oh, indeed!’ she ejaculated.

But, if she was shy, he was not, and he wanted to propitiate this lady of whom his mother had often spoken to him.

‘You are mother’s Aunt Margaretta,’ he began. ‘She said you were a beautiful lady, and very good to her. She told me to give you her dear love if ever I saw you. Perhaps I may not have another chance, as my grandfather Weatherley doesn’t ask me to the Court. I wish he would, and then I could tell you all about mother.’

‘Tell me now,’ she said, trembling with some emotion. He was beginning to pour forth his short life-history, when Marjory and Mamy burst into the room. Mamy had been crying after Weatherley, and Belle, not knowing the little by-play that was acting in the drawing-room, had sent them to him. Marjory drew back alarmed

on perceiving the stately lady, but Mamy ran to her brother.

‘Marjory, that is mamma’s dear Aunt Margaretta, who brought her up,’ half-whispered Weatherley.

Marjory looked frightened, but, having been well schooled in the arts of politeness, went to Miss Weatherley, said, ‘How do you do?’ and held up her cheek for a kiss to which she had been accustomed.

Mamy, who was an accomplished imitator, thought it her duty to do the same. With her head on one side, and her finger in her mouth, as usual, she followed Marjory’s example. Her ‘owdo,’ and her angel-face, completely overcame Miss Weatherley. She caught the child up in her arms, and burst into tears.

‘Mustn’t ky,’ said the tender-hearted little one, putting her arms round her neck ; for childhood is full of sympathies.

‘Please don’t ! Mamy would be so sorry,’

pleaded Marjory, laying a hand on the shoulder of the sobbing lady.

‘We don’t mean to be rude, or unkind, or anything,’ said Weatherley, joining the group, his usual self-possession deserting him for the minute.

‘I know. I understand,’ said Miss Weatherley, whose woman’s heart was conquered by the touch of loving hands, and the pleadings of children’s voices.

And it was thus that Miss Dulcey found her relatives, old and young, when, with a not unnatural curiosity, she came to see how Weatherley was getting on with his great-aunt.

‘Will you order the carriage, Dulcey? I must go at once, though I am very glad I came, and—and have seen poor Amy’s children,’ said Miss Weatherley; and her sister rang the bell, understanding the emotion, and feeling thankful for it.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO GRANDFATHERS.

BELLE was ringleader in all the games, and, while she, Dolly, and the rest were filling the air with laughter, she little thought what weighty issues were at stake, so near at hand. She did not even know that Miss Weatherley had come to the treat, but she knew that her nephew and nieces were happy together, and would return to her whensoever it pleased them. So she gave herself up to the occupation of the moment, which she always did, never looking much ahead to spy out what no mag-

nifying glass, however strong, could bring near. The schoolchildren had *carte blanche* to wander as they liked over Miss Dulcey's small domain, and some might have been seen, arm in arm, admiring her flowers, others stroking Miss Saucy in the stable, others, again, feeding her pigeons in the yard at the back. But most of them preferred the games in the well-known paddock. Here Mr. Burmester and Belle reigned, and the hours sped all too swiftly for the children under their sceptre. The scene was idyllic, albeit of the nineteenth century. Meadows stretched far on all sides save one, and blue hills girdled them. The children sported and shouted, and the Gables and Vicarage looked kindly down upon them. All was brightness and enjoyment.

‘Who wants tea and cake?’ shouted Mr. Burmester, as the church clock struck five.

Belle looked about her, and perceived that Marjory and Mamy were at play under Dolly's superintendence, and that Weatherley was with Miss Dulcey looking on.

‘Where is Miss Weatherley?’ asked the schoolchildren, who had a certain awe and admiration of that fair lady.

The question was repeated by Mr. Burmester to Miss Dulcey, who said she had gone home. Miss Dulcey looked unusually grave, and Mr. Burmester wondered whether she had offended Miss Margaretta. But there was no time for surmisings. Miss Cross, the school-mistress, re-formed the procession, and the children marched down the gravel path and stone steps in the same order they had marched up. Weatherley joined it, and Miss Dulcey closed the procession, leading Mamy by the hand. They sang as they went, and, while they all defiled into the school-house

and took their seats at the tea-tables, Miss Dulcey beckoned Belle outside. She related what had passed in her drawing-room, and, with much feeling, told how she had found the children surrounding her sister.

‘Wonders will never cease while childhood lasts,’ she said. ‘I had much ado to prevent Mamy from choking Margaretta and spoiling the silver-grey satin; while the other children had their arms about her, just as if they had known her all their lives. I was obliged to send them off to Dolly while I had a talk with Margaretta. She is converted, but will only follow where Hewson leads. She is quite willing to second him in his efforts for Weatherley, if he remain in the same mind; but she has set her heart upon Mamy. Now I like Marjory best, because she gives no trouble, so we can have one apiece.’

Miss Dulcey laughed, and Belle was so

surprised that she could only exclaim that it was altogether incomprehensible, and ask what had become of Miss Weatherley.

‘She went home, for she was really too much overcome to remain,’ replied Miss Dulcey. ‘I can’t think what the end of it will be. A muddle, perhaps; for the Daunceys are a stiff-necked generation, and won’t be patronised.’

‘Still, there is hope. And if only we can have good news of Charlie, all will be right,’ said Belle.

‘If you please, Miss Dulcey, Mr. Burmester is waiting to say grace,’ here broke in a small girl.

They hurried back to the school-room, and, while Belle took her place at the head of one long table, Miss Dulcey stood by Mr. Burmester while he pronounced the blessing. She preferred flitting about, butterfly-like, from table to table, to being chained

to one spot. Besides, they had servers and waiters innumerable; for all the teachers, and Miss Dulcey's maids, and the Vicarage servants, to say nothing of Molly from Castle Farm, were busy as bees, and if the children did not die of repletion, it was not for want of being pressed to eat and drink.

'Let 'em have their fill. I'll pay the doctor,' said Miss Dulcey; and she was always obeyed.

After the feast, the children had more games in the playground, while the room was cleared of tables, and prepared for the village concert. Belle was prima donna here; not as amateur musician so much, as organiser. She would have made a splendid worker in the biggest ragged school in the mightiest of cities; but she found her vocation just as well in the quiet village of Hollyfield. So did the vicar, who was as proud of his choir and

Sunday-school singers as he would have been of his choir had he been Dean of St. Paul's.

Everybody came to the concert, even Mrs. Burmester, who was wheeled down in her garden-chair, and received with acclamations by the children. A comfortable seat had been provided for her, and had she been the wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury she could scarcely have been more warmly welcomed.

‘Not half so warmly,’ cried Miss Dulcey, when some such idea was suggested. Miss Dulcey stood at the door to receive all comers. The wonder was that she had any hand at all when the room was filled, for they all shook hands with her.

‘This *is* amazing! I *am* glad to see you!’ she was heard to exclaim, just as the children were beginning a favourite hymn; for we must premise by saying, they sang at intervals during our concert,

much as glee-clubs do in more ambitious gatherings.

The first word was on their lips when a murmur went through the room, followed by a shout and a great clapping of hands.

‘The squire! the squire!’ sounded on all sides, and in walked that autocrat.

‘I was passing and just looked in,’ he said to Miss Dulcey. ‘I can’t stay long, so I’ll sit near the door.’

‘Have you seen Margaretta?’ asked shrewd Miss Dulcey.

‘Yes; she told me you were giving a feast, so I came to partake.’

‘A feast of music, if not a flow of soul, for the gormandising is over,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘Let the *children go on,’ she added to the schoolmaster

Two events happened during this short colloquy. Mr. Dauncey stalked in, passed the squire, and took a seat in a remote

corner of the room, while his grandson pushed his way through the crowd, and greeted the squire with effusion.

‘How do you do, sir? I am so glad you are come. Thank you for being so kind the other day,’ he said, and they shook hands.

As we have already said, Weatherley was not shy, and had nothing to be ashamed of, so he sat down by the squire, to the alarm of Belle, who was seated at no great distance, with Mamy on her lap. She knew well that Squire Weatherley would brook no pushing or presumption, and feared that his grandson’s eagerness to make reparation and further acquaintance would result in failure. Of course, all eyes were turned furtively upon them, but none so inquisitively as those of Mr. Dauncey, who stood up and leaned against the wall the better to observe them. He had a frown on his usually unwrinkled brow, and did not ap-

pear to be pleased with this sudden acquaintance. However, the concert went on. The squire was musical and critical, and made occasional grimaces and interjections at false notes and falser pronunciation.

‘They don’t sing quite as well as they do in London, but I like it better,’ whispered Weatherley, confidentially.

‘What is that?’ cried the squire, placing his hand behind his ear, for he was slightly deaf.

A village prima donna was beginning to sing ‘Comin’ Through the Rye,’ a favourite ditty with the country folk, and one well known to the squire, because his daughter Amy used to sing it. A voice like a bird’s suddenly joined in with the refrain, and everybody turned to discover whence came the sound. It proceeded from the little girl seated on Belle’s lap. Mamy had been accustomed to join in all sorts of songs, and

this was familiar to her, so her sweet childish treble mingled with the less captivating voice of the damsel who was singing her best. It discomposed her slightly, but Mamy, nothing abashed, sang on, and the result was a universal encore.

‘Who is it?’ repeated the squire.

‘It is our little Mamy,’ whispered his grandson. ‘She can sing everything, and there’s no preventing her joining when she likes. She sings to all the barrel organs. She is there, on Aunt Belle’s lap.’

The squire glanced towards Aunt Belle, who was trying to reassure Mamy, frightened by the applause she did not understand. The fair face was hidden on her shoulder, and he saw only the golden curls. It was but a child’s head amongst a mass of people of all ages, but there was something singularly attractive in that small, golden-haired ball, when buried in shy surprise on Aunt Belle’s sympathetic breast.

The squire watched it while the prima donna responded to the encore, and 'Comin' Through the Rye' was vigorously sung in a dialect certainly not Scotch. But no sweet child treble accompanied it this second time, and it fell flat on the audience, who had often heard it before from the same lips.

'Have you seen Marjory, sir?' asked Weatherley, intuitively understanding that his grandfather was interested. 'That is Marjory, standing by Mrs. Burmester. She isn't fair like Mamy, but she's very pretty; everybody says so.'

The squire glanced across to where Mrs. Burmester occupied the seat of honour, and saw a black-haired child looking at him, for Marjory was standing up to watch him and Weatherley.

He suddenly pulled out his watch.

'I had no idea it was so late,' he said, rising hastily, and going to his sister, who

was not far off. ‘Good-night, Dulcey ; you are really wonderful with your concerts and teas. I’ll send my subscription. Wish the vicar good-night for me.’ They shook hands, and he disappeared without a word to Weatherley. But the boy was not to be daunted ; he followed him.

‘May I wish you good-night, sir?’ he said. ‘Perhaps it will be a long time before I see you again.’

‘Good-night ; good-night,’ replied the squire, so hastily that Weatherley feared he had offended him ; but he was reassured by the words—‘Are you quite well ? Have you recovered from the blow ?’

And so they parted. Weatherley returned to the concert, and the squire rode off. Many were the remarks that succeeded, and the surmises concerning grandfather and grandson were soon circulating far and near.

The evening came to an end with a

further distribution of cake. There was an *ab libitum* supply, and the school-children departed with a big slice in apron or handkerchief.

‘They have enjoyed themselves, Miss Dulcey,’ said Dolly, emphatically; and so they had.

But, after all, enjoyment is transitory. So moralised Weatherley, who had conceived a sincere and disinterested attachment to the squire, who yet had not invited him to the Court. He moralised still more painfully before he retired to rest that night.

Scarcely was the little party from Castle Farm inside the drawing-room, when Mr. Dauncey closed the door with an ominous bang, and turned on Weatherley.

‘So, sir,’ he began, ‘you are currying favour with the squire, are you? I should like to know how you have managed to scrape acquaintance with him.’

‘I didn’t scrape acquaintance, grandfather; I met him twice by chance. The first time I was very rude to him; and the second he was very kind to me. And now I know him quite well.’

‘Indeed! Perhaps you don’t know, also, that he has cut all connection with us, because his daughter married my son. We don’t want any of his condescension, and a boy who truckles to him may go and live with him, if he likes, but he shan’t live here.’

If Mr. Dauncey’s temper rose, so did Weatherley’s. The boy was as hot and independent as his grandfather. Belle trembled for the consequences, and laid her hand on her father’s shoulder.

‘It is late,’ she said, gently. ‘The children should be in bed. Will you settle this to-morrow?’

‘No time like the present. I repeat that there is a wide gulf between Court and

Farm, and anyone who chooses to pass it can't retrace his way. Take the little girls to bed, and leave the boy with me.'

'I cannot, father. Charlie has put them in my care, and, while they are here, I must see after them. I will come back to you as soon as they are in bed, and we will discuss the matter.'

'I am not sleepy, Aunt Belle. I never used to go to bed till ten,' said Weatherley, with an assumption of manhood that made his grandfather smile in spite of himself. 'I know what I have to say if you will let me say it, and I don't want to offend anyone. Poor mother told me to be kind to her father if I could, and I disobeyed her the first time I spoke to him.'

'I want no excuses, sir,' said Dauncey, almost fiercely. 'You are old enough to make a choice. You have two grandfathers—one a rich squire, the other a poor farmer. Choose between us. I'll have no dealings

with a man who thinks dirt of my only son. I see the sort of lad you are. You are looking for the loaves and fishes.'

'Indeed, I am not !' rejoined Weatherley, indignantly. 'I don't know what you mean. I want to earn my own living, and that's all. Why are you angry with me because my other grandfather is kind to me ?'

'A pretty sort of a grandfather ! He has never done a thing for any of you, and hates your father and me, and would ruin us all if he could.'

At this juncture Molly popped her head in, and asked if she should put Mamy to bed. Belle sent her off gladly with Marjory, and taking Weatherley by the hand bade him sit down and not answer her father. Then she said she had something important to communicate. The boy commanded his temper, and seated himself at his aunt's side, while Mr. Dauncey

walked about as usual. Then Belle related, as shortly and clearly as she could, what had passed at the Gables during her interview with Mr. Weatherley and Miss Dulcey. She said that the squire had offered to educate and provide for his grandson, on condition that he was wholly entrusted to him. She recounted as nearly as she could, word for word, what had passed, not venturing to enlarge on possibilities, or to hint at the probability that the boy would be separated from the Dauncey family. She told him her tale simply, without offering an opinion. Weatherley was for interrupting her a dozen times in his ecstasy of delight, but she kept hold of his hand and restrained him.

‘And what did you say to all that flummery?’ asked Dauncey, sternly, stopping in his walk and facing Belle and Weatherley.

‘I said we would consult Charlie, father. He is the natural guardian of his children,

and has power over them,' replied Belle, firmly. 'I think we must await his decision.'

'Charlie hasn't the spirit of a mouse. His son has twice his pluck. He shall decide for himself. You may accept Mr. Weatherley's offer if you will. You will have a grand bringing up, and perhaps inherit the Court. But he has a will of his own, and, if you offended him, would soon turn you off. Then there would be no other door open to you, for you should never come back here.'

Dauncey was a far more intolerant man than the squire, and spoke these words in fierce wrath. The boy was frightened, but he felt his aunt's fingers tighten over his hand as she said,

'I hope Weatherley will be an obedient son. As there is so much anxiety just now about this American property, I think we had better decide nothing till we hear from

Charlie. Perhaps, dear father, you will let us talk it over again to-morrow.'

'Now or never. Make up your mind, sir, at once. I saw this evening where it inclined,' said Dauncey, with a firmness that astonished Belle, who knew him to be by nature unstable.

'I will do exactly what father wishes,' said Weatherley. 'He will know best.'

'He will not need to educate his son upon charity, now that we shall have a fortune as big or much bigger than the philanthropist's who offers to bring him up for nothing. I don't want to be beholden to a Weatherley.'

Here Mr. Dauncey paused, for he remembered Miss Dulcey, and how much he owed her in many ways.

'Dear father,' put in Belle, 'I am sure the squire intends no benefit. He may feel sorry for his past hardness and wish to make reparation. He doted on poor

Amy, and the sight of the children, and Weatherley's apology, and perhaps the flight of years, have softened his heart. I wish it would please God to give us all softer hearts.'

'Pray don't add butter or dripping or any kind of grease to the wheels of your arguments, Belle. That sort of thing has no effect on me. Mr. Weatherley chooses to cut me and all my family because this boy's mother married my son contrary to his will. I had nothing to do with it. I didn't want his daughter, though I loved her dearly when she belonged to us, and did all I could to prolong her life—impoverished myself to try to save it, for Charlie and the children's sake. And all this time he was harder than iron, and would have let 'em all starve.'

'No, grandfather,' interrupted Weatherley. 'He sent money through Aunt Dulcey; he did, indeed. And if mother had

not gone to heaven when she did, if only she had lived, they would have been friends again. I think her death prevented it.'

'I daresay it did. He fancied we had killed her amongst us, and grew harder than ever. Be that as it may, Master Weatherley, until he asks me, in person, to forget the past, I am not likely to do so ; and I repeat that you must choose between us.'

Saying this, Mr. Dauncey flung out of the room, leaving Belle and Weatherley in much distress. They discussed the subject, but could come to no decision beyond the natural one, that Charlie was the person to be consulted, and that his wish must be law.

'I love them both,' said Weatherley. 'I would offend neither. Indeed, I could not leave grandfather Dauncey without his consent. I must tell the squire so ; I think he would understand me.'

‘Do nothing till we hear from your father,’ said Belle. ‘Let us pray to our heavenly Father to order all things for us. He brings wonders to pass in a way we never dream of. If we could trust Him entirely, we need fear no evil, for He can turn even evil to good. It is strange that we cannot believe His promise to help all who trust in Him.’

‘I do believe it, Aunt Belle. Father and mother believed it, though they always said repentance and faith must go together. They were very, very sorry for having offended the squire, and I am sure they both repented.’

‘They certainly did,’ sighed Belle.

CHAPTER XIII.

FLO.

THE following day the atmosphere of the farm was heavy. Mr. Dauncey took little notice of his grandchildren, and Weatherley felt personally aggrieved. Belle was worried in a thousand ways, and but for Molly, who always knew everything, must have broken down under her burdens. It was Molly who amused and occupied the little girls while Belle wrote that fateful letter to Charlie, and Molly who set Weatherley to superintend the farm work. He was equal to the occasion, and almost forgot that he had two belligerent grand-

fathers ready to quarrel over him. At any rate, they were all out of the way when Belle sat down at the old bureau and began, 'My dearest Charlie.' Her pen flowed glibly enough, though her heart was torn by many conflicting emotions: the most powerful of which was anxiety concerning that dear brother. They had not heard from him for a fortnight; and she wished with all her heart that there were no such country as Canada in the world.

Still, she told her story, and asked him to be careful in his reply. Advise him she could not: for, look where she would, there were complications, and, if this great fortune turned out a myth, she knew not what would become of him or his children. Indeed, she scarcely knew what would become of any of them, for her father could think of little but his hoped-for wealth, and neglected the farm in his great expectations.

He came in before she had finished, and stood by the bureau. He said he supposed she was writing about this 'new speculation,' as he termed it; for he had recovered his temper, though he had not changed his mind. Temper and mind are independent, though they act and react on each other. He had a versatile mind and a hot temper. Belle was glad to see him in his normal state, and answered him cheerfully that she was simply stating the squire's proposal to Charlie; then she ventured to add that, if the squire adopted Weatherley, she did not see that it need interfere with their relations with the boy. But she saw that her father was obstinate in his resolution and not likely to change.

'So long as I pay my rent, I am under no obligation to old Weatherley,' he said. 'He is an unforgiving tyrant, and wants everything his own way. But, if he gets the boy, I'll have no more to say to him.'

I don't wonder he's taken a fancy to him, for he's a fine, independent fellow, in spite of his conceited London ways and his cane.'

Belle was glad to hear her father give a slight chuckle, and changed the subject to the next-of-kin. Once set upon that, he forgot everything else. He was as hot upon that as ever.

'We can snap our fingers at the squire and everybody else when we get Jabez Dauncey's money,' he said. 'Why, we can buy him up, body and soul. Tell Charlie that, rather than give up my claim, I'll join him, even if I cheat old Weatherley of his rent!'

'Aunt Belle, Aunt Belle!' broke in young voices, and the three children appeared, shouting, 'A letter from father.'

They had waylaid the postman as usual.

The letter was addressed to Belle, and

she glanced through it, her father and the children watching her intently.

‘What’s the matter? Something is wrong,’ cried Dauncey, for the joy vanished from her face as she read.

‘Charlie has been laid up,’ she replied. ‘But he says he is nearly well again.’

Mr. Dauncey seized the letter, and ran through it.

‘One of his old attacks of nervous depression; that’s all. Business delayed—complications—no great progress as yet—claimants—everybody very kind—love to the dear children; hope they are good and obedient. Charlie all over,’ he commented.

‘Will you read it out, Aunt Belle?’ asked Weatherley.

There was not much to read, for the letter was short and somewhat disjointed. It was evident that the writer was making the best of his position, and Belle feared

that he had been worse than he allowed. Weatherley, who was looking over her shoulder, exclaimed,

‘It isn’t like father’s writing. Look, Aunt Belle, how shaky it is.’

‘Of course he’s weak after a feverish attack,’ said hopeful Mr. Dauncey. ‘Charlie was always having attacks of one kind or another.’

‘Indeed he was not, grandfather,’ spoke up Marjory. ‘He never used to be ill.’

‘He never gave way,’ put in oracular Weatherley; ‘but I know he used to be very weak. I wish he had never gone to America.’

So did Belle; but her father would not allow the indisposition to be of moment, and sent the children hastily from the room, in order that he might discuss it with his daughter, exclaiming, as Weatherley disappeared,

‘He is the most bumptious, conceited

boy I ever saw in my life!’ Then, to Belle, ‘I am almost inclined to go myself and see after Charlie and the business.’

‘There is no money, father. I don’t see how it can be managed,’ said Belle, cautiously. ‘Besides, Charlie is really better, and I hope there is no cause for alarm.’

Her voice belied her words, for there was a tremulous choke in it, which, however, preoccupied Dauncey did not perceive.

‘Pearce will lend me a trifle. He is so fond of you, Belle, that I’m sure there is nothing he would not do for us.’

‘Oh, father!’ cried alarmed Belle, ‘don’t go to him! You owe him more than you can pay already; and I would not be under an obligation to him for the world.’

‘But perhaps you would to save your brother’s life, and to get all that Dauncey fortune. We could pay him off then,

and you could pick and choose and marry a prince. For our nobility go in for big American fortunes nowadays, taking the incumbrance with them, as Miss Dulcey says. I'm not sure whether you would be attractive enough, but Flo would.'

'Flo is attractive enough for anything,' sighed Belle; 'but I should be sorry to think she was to be thrown into the scales along with the money, even if the prince appeared.'

'Whatever happens, I do not mean to give up the next-of-kin, and I will consult Pearce about it,' said Dauncey, walking rapidly.

Belle got up from her bureau and arrested him. She held him by the arm, and looked so resolute that he was fain to listen to her.

'You must not go to him while there is any other chance,' she said. 'Better use the money for the rent, or sell the hay, or

anything, if you are determined to go ; but better still to wait for another letter. Dear father ! for my sake, have no more to do with Mr. Pearce. Indeed, he does not bear a high character, and you, who are honest and trustful, cannot understand him. Let me at least consult Miss Dauncey.'

'No, Belle. She is too generous, and would give the money. I could not accept it, though Charlie could, as her nephew-in-law. I will at least wait till the next mail. But what if Charlie should be worse?'

'We must try to leave him to God's care, father. Only let us do what is right.'

'Right! I wonder what is right? Your mother was always pestering me with that word, and now you are for ever using it. I know it is right that I should see after the men, so finish your letter, and tell Charlie I'll go out to him if he wants me.'

Poor Belle sat down again, and took up

the thread of her broken epistle. She had already disposed of the squire and Weatherley, and set to work to reply to Charlie's letter, and to tell him what his father said. This was no easy task; for she believed that father and son were both unpractical, and that it needed slight impulse to send the one across the Atlantic to the other.

When she had finished, she went in search of the children. She found them in Flo's parlour, trying to console one another; for they had taken it into their heads that father was very ill, and would, perhaps, die. As she entered the room, Marjory, who was the little preacher of the family, was saying gravely, that if he died he would be very happy, because he would go to heaven to their mother, and it could not be much farther to heaven than to America. Weatherley had Mamy on his knee, and looked much cast down. He had not recovered from the dispute with his grand-

father the previous evening, and had been watching for an opportunity to 'have it out with him,' as he expressed it : by which he meant, to apologise, if necessary.

'My dear children,' began Belle, cheerfully, 'I hope there is not so much the matter with your father.'

As she spoke, there was a sudden stir in the passage, accompanied by a joyful bark from Rover. In another moment the door was burst open, and in came 'a dancing shape, a figure gay,' at sight of which Belle and the children uttered a glad cry.

'Flo ! Aunt Flo !'

This was the cry, and instantly two sisters, who dearly loved one another, were folded in a close embrace. Then there was hugging of the three children, and finally the new-comer rushed back to the hall door, exclaiming that the fly was waiting, and the luggage must be brought in. Molly arrived in great excitement, with

‘Miss Flo! There’s glad I am,’ on her lips, and she was followed by Joe, who had seen the fly drive through the yard. The hubbub was great, and in the midst of it up sauntered Mr. Dauncey.

‘Flo! my darling!’ he exclaimed.

‘Yes, father, here I am at last!’ returned the truant daughter, and cast her graceful arms about her father. ‘Oh! I am glad to come home again. There’s no place like home.’

‘How long will you think so, Flo?’ asked her father, laughing, and forgetting late chagrin at the sight of his spoilt pet. ‘How well you look, child! A little brown, perhaps, but wonderfully healthy. Travelling suits you.’

‘I’ve had enough of it for the present. I mean to settle down,’ replied Flo, paying the driver with an air that drew forth an admiring laugh from her father, and an

order to Molly that the man and horse should have a feed.

Belle, meanwhile, was superintending the transport of the luggage upstairs, and, when this was accomplished, they all returned together to the parlour, the children clinging to Flo, whom they had known before Aunt Belle.

‘Where is Mrs. Prendergast? Why are you back before the time appointed?’ asked Belle.

‘You shall know all when I have had something to eat. We have been travelling two nights and a day without intermission, and I do really feel a little tired. Shall we go upstairs?’

Belle bade the children tell Molly to hasten dinner, and the sisters went to their room.

‘Dearest of dear Belles! sweetest of sweet rooms!’ cried Flo, again kissing her

sister. 'There was nothing like either of you abroad, and it is a dream to be here once more.'

'Sentimental as ever,' laughed Belle, unfastening Flo's mantle, and emptying the water-jug into the capacious basin.

'Delicious; plenty of water and big, clean towels,' said Flo, dipping her face into the water, and afterwards rubbing it up.

Belle watched her with a satisfied smile. She was, at least, not changed for the worse, though the fashion of her hair was altered. Flo, like the rest of her sex, was always changing the cut of her hair, as if personal beauty and general attractiveness depended entirely on the arrangement of certain locks, which became long or short, coiled or loose, according to the fashion. At the moment, Flo's were much frizzed and curled in front and drawn up at the back into a golden twist which rested on

the crown of her head, and here and there a somewhat coquettish short curl touched her forehead lightly. It would be as difficult to describe Flo's golden head as her face. She had large, liquid blue eyes that met the gaze of other eyes with childlike confidence. Her features were strictly classical, by which we are supposed to understand that she had a straight nose and pretty mouth, etc. We get tired of the enumeration of female charms, and leave the rest to the imagination. But her figure was singularly easy and graceful, and she clothed it in a way peculiar to herself. Her bodice was always loose, her skirts flowing, and she eschewed an exuberance of frills and furbelows, which interfered, as she knew well enough, with the natural grace of her form. No one could tell whether she was conscious or not of the admiration she excited, go where she would; apparently she was un-

conscious, and this added to her charm.

‘You have wetted that cunning curl,’ said Belle; ‘you usen’t to have one there, above the forehead.’

She looked in the glass and gave a touch here and there to the tortured locks.

‘You are wisest, after all, Belle. You always look the same, and I love your smooth head,’ she said, tenderly stroking her sister’s hair.

As they went downstairs, Flo’s arm encircled Belle’s waist, and so they entered the dining-room.

‘Not improved, Flo. Dinner waiting,’ said Mr. Dauncey. ‘Can you condescend to farmhouse fare after all the foreign kickshaws?’

‘Oh, it is delightful! I am so happy!’ replied Flo.

Her appetite did not belie her words, and she made a good dinner. In spite of fatigue, she managed to tell her tale during

its course, her father and the others listening with interest. Mrs. Prendergast had resolved to return before she originally intended, Flo did not quite know why. She was a charming woman, and had been most kind. Indeed, there had been nothing but enjoyment during their tour. She was much obliged to Miss Dulcey for recommending her as *compagne de voyage*, and had promised Mrs. Prendergast to accompany her again, if she wanted her. They had parted at Orchardson Station, because Mrs. Prendergast went straight home, and she thought it best that she—Flo—should do the same.

‘Mr. Mulready seemed so glad to see me, and was so very, very kind,’ she said, looking at Belle. ‘He saw to my luggage and the fly, while the porter looked after Mrs. Prendergast’s and took it to her carriage, which was waiting. He desired to be remembered to you and father, and

sent you that bouquet, which—I verily believe I left it in the fly, and perhaps it will go back to him.’

‘Oh, Flo! How could you!’ put in Belle, aggrieved.

‘I quite forgot it. I am so sorry!’ cried Flo, whose memory was never good for trifles, and who was always getting into trouble for want of thought.

‘What does it matter? It is only a few flowers,’ said Mr. Dauncey, but Belle was quite put out.

Flo did not perceive it, and chattered on, much to her father’s delight. She was not aware that Mr. Mulready and Belle were good friends, and soon forgot the bouquet, if Belle did not. All the same, she said that she had seen nothing abroad so pretty as Orchardson Station, and thought Mr. Mulready must be a born gentleman, he was so polite and had such good manners.

When dinner was over, Flo went to lie down. Belle insisted on her resting before entering further upon her various adventures, and while she slept long and peacefully in the room they had shared together since childhood, Belle and the little girls went to tell Miss Dulcey of her return. Nothing happened at Hollyfield that was not instantly communicated to Miss Dulcey.

She was much interested both in Flo and the events of the previous evening, and, having sent the children into the garden, she began to talk about the squire and Weatherley. When Belle related what had passed at the farm after the concert, she said it was just what she had expected ; but when she heard of Charlie's illness, she was greatly concerned. Belle did not mention the new difficulty connected with her father's proposed visit to America, but shrewd Miss Dulcey saw

clearly enough that fresh weight lay somewhere or other on her god-daughter's amply-burdened mind.

‘My opinion is that Charlie will keep Weatherley with him, fortune or no fortune,’ she said; ‘and one can’t blame him. Of course, if you get the millions, the world would declare him right; if they go elsewhere, they will say he is wrong. That’s the way of the world, Belle. As to Charlie, I am afraid he is weak both in body and mind. Now, don’t take up his cudgels! I mean he is too amiable to be decided, and an amiable man is useless out of his own family. There he is an idol, or ought to be: for there is a reverse side even in that delightful picture.’

‘Weatherley is not exactly what one would call amiable,’ said Belle, reflectively.

‘No, he is masterful,’ returned Miss

Dulcey, 'which has been the means of his attracting my brother to him. I think he will do. But what is to become of Flo? She will be a duchess if you get the fortune; if you are ruined, as you must be if you lose it, she is good for nothing. Why didn't she go in for the "higher education of women," instead of frittering away her time over accomplishments? Not that I believe in your certificated and learned ladies. Between ourselves, I hate 'em.'

When Miss Dulcey wound up thus, Belle knew that the argument was closed. But she was always asking herself, what could Flo do? If she was too attractive for a companion, there seemed no other door opened to her. It was evident that Mrs. Prendergast had found her, if not exactly a rival, at any rate a hindrance; and, since she was neither highly accomplished nor 'certificated,' she was not capable of obtaining a permanent situation as governess.

In spite of oracular Miss Dulcey, Belle's common sense told her that it was best to qualify yourself for some sort of occupation if obliged to earn your livelihood. She had qualified herself for housekeeping and country work generally, and she knew she could secure a situation if obliged to leave home. But Flo's training had been so desultory, that she was fitted for nothing but a companion, and she was too attractive for that. Belle thought of her as she was at that moment, happy in sleep and unconsciousness, and wondered how she would feel when she awoke and realised that she was condemned to the dulness of Castle Farm, and, perhaps, daily tuition at the vicarage. Belle had been accustomed to her complaints when she returned from her visits to Charlie and Amy in London, and, in spite of her love for Flo, she dreaded them.

CHAPTER XIV.

FLO'S DISCLOSURES.

FLO slept undisturbed far into the evening. Her father was annoyed at her not appearing at the tea-table. But when his favourite Marjory said that she had been travelling two whole nights and one whole day without stopping, he declared that the world was going mad, and he believed sleep was the best curative for brain disease. He was very irritable, and evidently found it difficult to be civil to poor Weatherley, who, beneath a bold front, had a very sensitive heart.

To Belle's great delight, Miss Dulcey looked in, and, with her usual straightforwardness, said she had come to see Flo, and to have a word with him. Belle took the children from the room, and told Weatherley to amuse his sisters until Miss Dulcey wanted them.

'She is probably come to talk about you and the squire. You will need prudence beyond your years,' she whispered to the boy.

'I shall do what father wishes,' was the prompt reply.

Belle feared that he would have to lean on a broken reed, for she knew as well as Miss Dulcey that her brother was wanting in decision ; but she hurried back into the dining-room to hear Miss Dulcey taking her father to task.

'You won't ruin the boy's prospects by keeping him away from my brother if he wishes to see him,' she was saying. 'If

we offend Hewson now he has made this proposal, he isn't likely to make another. He is nearly as obstinate as you are, Mr. Dauncey, and I take it——'

Miss Dulcey paused.

'Say it out, ma'am. You think that if we could be well hashed up together we should made a tough dish that nobody could masticate,' returned Dauncey, suppressing a smile.

'You have hit it off exactly. But there is always a tender slice somewhere, even in the worst of joints, if one has the patience to try for it; and, since my brother has shown his tit-bit, you may as well let us have yours. He has taken a fancy to the boy, and surely you won't stand in his light?'

'Now, Miss Dulcey, if you think I am going to be won over to try to conciliate a man who has been my enemy for fourteen years, and my son's enemy, and the

boy's enemy for that much, you are mistaken.'

'Scarcely an enemy, Mr. Dauncey. You must allow he was sinned against. You wouldn't like—well, you wouldn't like young Peach to carry off Flo? They say that he's desperately in love with her.'

'Charlie is a gentleman, Miss Dulcey : young Peach is—I never thought of him before—but he is—the son of a farmer ; and there are farmers and farmers.'

'We won't quarrel if we can help it, Mr. Dauncey. But we all know there isn't too much money in your family, and one must live.'

'There will be, Miss Dulcey ; there will be ! Tell the squire, with my compliments, that he shan't have the boy if I can help it. We shall soon be twice as rich as he is ; and we shall be able to purchase a baronetcy, or an earldom, or

anything else we like, for money rules the world.'

'And brains. We must have brains to manage the money. Without 'em, it will go to the dogs. Your grandson has brains, and they haven't been quite muddled and melted as yet by all these competitive examinations. Not but that he expects to go through them. But, between ourselves, Mr. Dauncey, half the young men—and women, too—look absolutely dazed with cramming. And you may cram the mind as much as the body. A fat animal loses his spirits and the lustre of his eye from over-feeding; and I shouldn't be surprised if they put the prime beasts in spectacles, just as they do the young people, for blindness is quite the fashion.'

'Ha, ha, ha! I should like to see my bull Tommy in spectacles!' laughed Mr. Dauncey; and the idea tickled his fancy

so much that he forgot his grievances, and told Miss Dulcey that if anyone could come over him it was she.

‘Then you will reconsider your resolution about Weatherley? It isn’t often that a penniless lad becomes the bone of contention between two grandfathers. Belle, a word with you. It is getting late, and I am in a hurry.’

Miss Dulcey knew her man, so she gave Dauncey no time for a reply, but hopped briskly out of the room, with a hasty good-morning. Belle followed. She had not spoken during the interview.

‘You are that rare bird, a good listener, Belle,’ said Miss Dulcey. ‘There are not many of the genus left, and they are getting fossilised. Why, everybody chatters at the same time, and nobody listens to what anybody else says. We are all in our own concerns, and don’t care a jot for our neighbours. I’m a talker, I confess,

but I like a little conversation. Women clamour for equal rights, but each wants the talk to herself. That is my case at the present moment.'

She went into Flo's parlour and turned the key in the door.

'I am not going to murder you, dear ; but I am afraid of those long-eared little pitchers. While Flo sleeps, I will just tell you what I heard from Mrs. Prendergast this morning. She said she would be back to-day, and asked me to inform you and your father that there is a certain Mr. Mute after Flo. She mentioned him before. He has been following them from place to place, and, as he is the first person who appears to have attracted Flo, she has made inquiries concerning him. But she cannot discover who or what he is. He appears to be a gentleman, and his manners and conduct are unobjectionable. As Flo is only a companion, he can scarce-

ly be an adventurer in search of an heir-ess. I am afraid this "attraction," as Mrs. Prendergast calls it, has hurried her home, for she hates that sort of thing as much as I do. A *bonâ-fide* proposal, acceptance, or refusal, is all very well—you know where you are; but your "hangers-on" are highly objectionable. Give my love to Flo, and tell her I hope she has come home for good. Be sure to emphasise the good.'

Miss Dulcey unlocked the door and hurried off, leaving Belle with an additional anxiety. This was partially relieved before she slept that night. Flo, wearied out by continual travelling, did not awake until late in the evening. Belle persuaded her father to excuse her coming downstairs, and so she remained in bed sleeping peacefully, until the rest of the household had retired to rest. Then she awoke, bright and animated, and began to talk to

Belle. They were early people at the farm, and the hour was not late, so Belle gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment, and listened to her sister's adventures, seated by her bedside. She began almost at once upon the subject that had caused Mrs. Prendergast to write to Miss Dulcey.

‘Now listen, Belle,’ she said, ‘for I am really in earnest.’

‘A new lover?’ laughed Belle.

‘I am not sure, Belle, but such a charming person! Only he has such a name. Mute! Mr. Mute—Mrs. Mute! I could never marry a man with that name.’

Flo sat up, and, of course, her fair hair fell about her as is the custom on such occasions, and equally, of course, she looked more natural than she did in the morning, when it was much perplexed by various turnings and windings.

‘Has he asked you to marry him?’ inquired matter-of-fact Belle.

‘Not exactly; but he said he was coming here as soon as possible to see me again, and to—well, to ask my father. It was very provoking; but the train started at the moment, and there was no time to say what he intended to ask.’

Both sisters laughed.

‘My dear Flo, you don’t care for him,’ said Belle.

‘Yes, I do; very much indeed. But I could never change my name to Mute. Ours is, at least, a respectable old name; and you have no idea how well it sounds when people call it Dawncey. He always said Dawncey. I dislike the short, sharp “a” as in dance; I think the broad, foreign “a” prettier. Don’t you, dear?’

‘No. I prefer everything English, as you know. But where did you meet and part from Mr. Mute? It certainly is “alliterative,” as young Peach says.’

‘Poor fellow! How is he? Peach is

not aristocratic, but it is better than Mute. I met him—I almost forget where; I think it was at Bordighera. But we had a narrow escape of a railway accident, and he helped us out of our carriage and saw to our luggage. Mrs. Prendergast said he was quite a gentleman; and she is sadly fastidious. After this we were always meeting, and it was so odd that we were always going to the same places. Even when we went to Florence, he turned up there; and it sometimes happened that we were in the same carriage. He is very good-looking. Where did we part? At Boulogne. He must just have arrived there from Paris, for he reached the station only a few minutes before we started. I saw him, and bowed from the window. He hurried up, and said those very uncomfortable words.'

'But how did he know where you lived?'

‘I think he asked me. At any rate, he managed to find out all about me, and made many inquiries concerning father. As he was a stranger, I was cautious, and did not say a word about the “next-of-kin.” I was determined that he should not think of us as probable millionaires. Now, if he comes to see us, it will merely be because he likes me. That is romantic!’

‘Very,’ put in Belle, drily. ‘But how did you get the opportunities for so many confidences?’

‘When Mrs. Prendergast fell in with old friends, they didn’t always want me, and I used to wander about alone. Then Mr. Mute always turned up. I am afraid I cannot get over the name, though I used to forget it when we were together.’

‘You had better forget it altogether, Flo, for you will probably never see him again,’ said Belle.

‘Then I shall go at once into a sister-

hood, or nursing institute, or something of the kind,' returned Flo, dolorously.

'That is what all the girls do when they are disappointed, Miss Dulcey says,' laughed Belle.

But she found that Flo was not inclined to laugh. She looked serious, and Belle began to wonder whether her volatile, fascinating sister was caught at last.

'He may be here to-morrow, or next day. I hope you will receive him kindly. He knows all about you, and what an excruciatingly good, dear sister you are,' said Flo, with an entreating gesture.

'I wish you would not use such exaggerated words. Of course I shall receive him kindly if he is an honourable, honest man.'

'That he is; you see it in his face. He is the sort of man you would like, only you are so matter-of-fact,' said Flo, with the half-reproachful, half-tearful intonation of

voice that Belle knew well, and which always conquered her.

‘Darling ! I hope it will all come right ; but we must leave it till he either appears or writes. Meanwhile, you have all your old friends to see, who won’t like to be put off for a new one ; and you have to settle whether you will undertake Dolly and Marjory, about which I wrote to you : for we are not very flush of money just now.’

‘We never are, Belle ; and, oh, I do hate teaching !’

Flo threw up her arms despairingly, and jumped out of bed, nearly upsetting Belle.

‘Let us pray together, and I will try to be good,’ she said, bursting into tears.

Belle took her in her arms and soothed her. She saw that she was unusually excitable, and told her that she meant to talk no more that night. Accordingly they knelt down side by side, and Belle offered up her humble, simple prayer for both, and

for all near and dear to them. When it was concluded, she added, as they rose from their knees,

‘ Now I shall give you your little “ pillow.” Get into bed like a good child.’

Flo obeyed, and Belle took a small textbook from her table and read, ‘ Cast all your care upon God, for He careth for you,’ which was the text for the day.

‘ That is a nice text,’ said Flo, and was soon asleep again.

Not so Belle. She sat long, pondering. Her brain was over-excited by the events of the day. She tried to review them. They came rushing up, *pêle-mêle*, and not like ordinary troops. Her father and Weatherley and their mutual difficulty, Miss Dulcey and her efforts at conciliation, and repetition of Mrs. Prendergast’s letter, Flo’s sudden arrival, and her wonderful disclosures, the bouquet returned to Mr. Mulready, and what would he think of such

neglect, and, last, Charlie and his children. Her darling Charlie! What if anything were to happen to him in that far-off land? What if her father should determine to go out to him? Belle was bewildered by the rush of thoughts that overwhelmed her.

She stemmed them at last by the barrier she had ever found the surest. She always wound up the day by prayerful study of God's holy word, and so she ended it now on her knees with that sacred volume before her. She knew that God gives strength to all who ask for it, and, having a childlike faith, she received the boon she craved—'strength according to her day.' She was soon slumbering by her sister's side, and rest and quiet brooded over the farm.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

BEV

